

著／ひとしずくP
ILLUST／鈴ノ助

上卷

Bad ∞ End ∞ Night



一迅社

Bad∞End∞Night: Volume 1

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Character Introductions

Miku: An up-and-coming actress in the Burlet Company. She was chosen to play the lead role of Crazy∞nighT after her audition.

Rin: Len's twin sister. She has a fierce fanclub of supporters. A child prodigy of the company.

Len: Rin's twin brother. A shy child prodigy. Many of his fans are rich gentleman bigshots.

Kaito: Serves as a leader organizing the Burlet Company. He is both an actor and the stage director.

Meiko: An actress of the Burlet Company. She is renowned for her bewitchingly precise, finely-detailed performances.

Luka: The Burlet Company's star actor, possessing an overpowering beauty. She also works as a model.

Meg: An actress of the Burlet Company who also writes on the side. She has eccentric sensibilities.

Gack: An actor of the Burlet Company. Manages an independent farm as a second job. He has a diligent and gentle personality.

Glossary

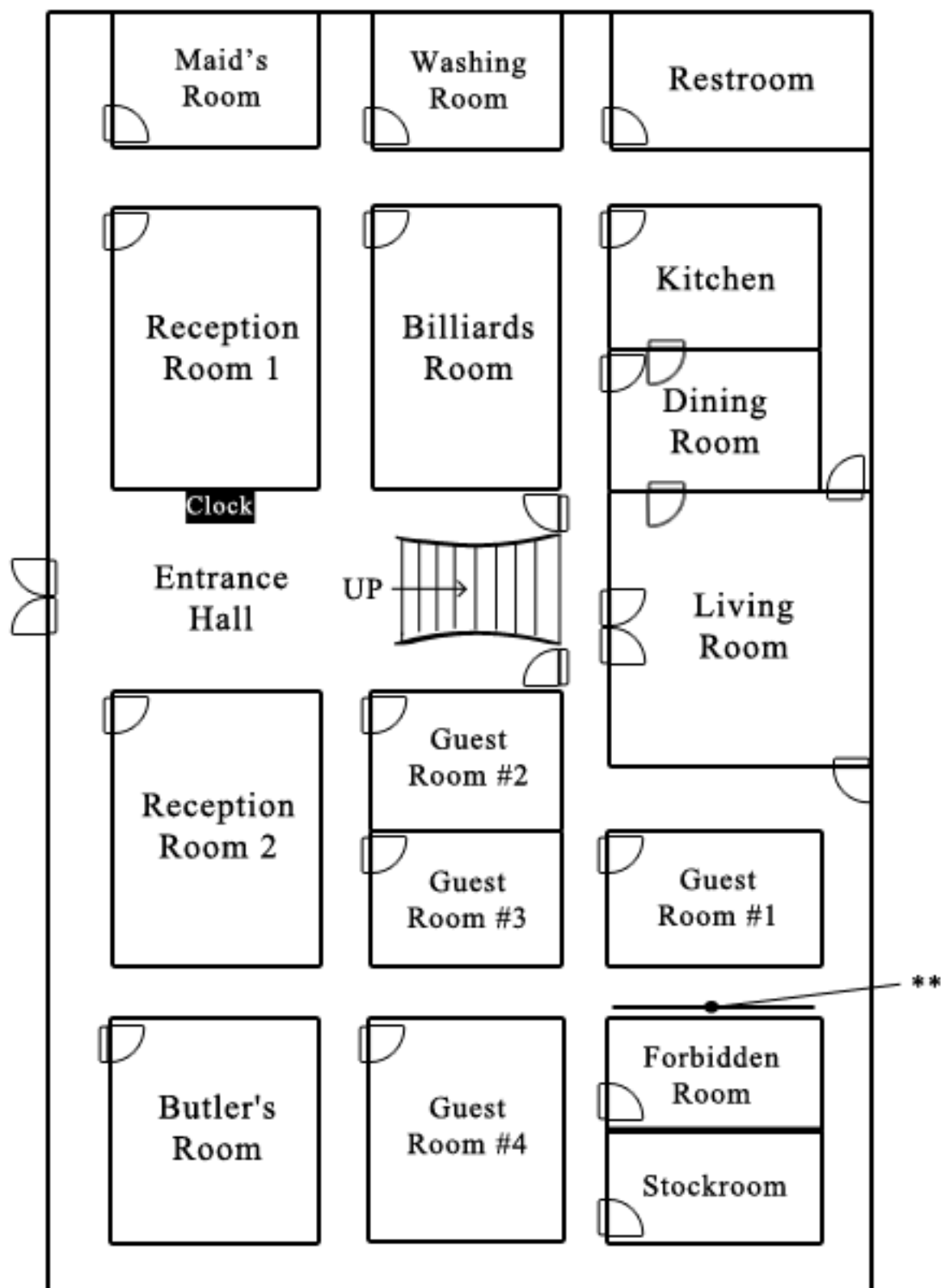
Crazy∞nighT: A lost Burlet script for which only the title had been revealed. It was discovered in the underground cellar of the Burlet Company.

Zacry Village: The home village of Miku and the playwright Mr. Burlet.

Mr. Burlet: A legendary playwright who, a century ago, kicked off a golden age of theater. He sought perfection, and an anecdote claims “any who profanes a Burlet play will meet an unhappy death.”

The Burlet Company: The acting troupe established by Mr. Burlet. Once highly prosperous, it has lost much of its former glory, and business is not faring well.

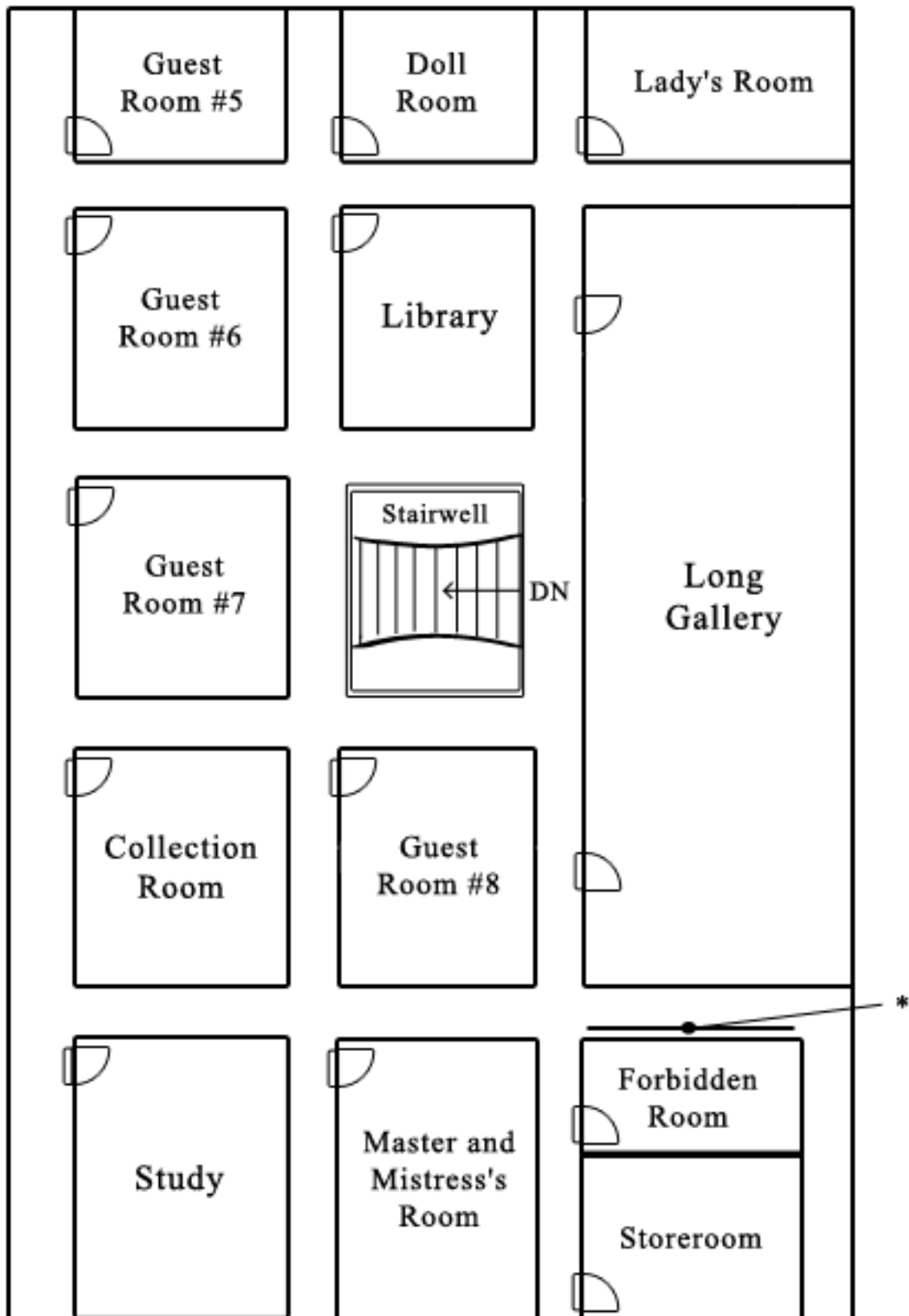
Mansion 1st Floor Top-Down View



* Below the 1F stairs is a wine cellar.

** Twilight ∞ night Painting

Mansion 2nd Floor Top-Down View



* Twilight ∞ nighT Painting

Prologue: The First Night

Slam - with the loud sound of [her] opening the door, the merrymaking people within the room slowly turned to face it. One with beer mugs in both hands, redfaced but still drinking; one engaging with their drunken friend; one engrossed in conversation, eyes shining with excitement; one pretending to listen to the prior; one singing, one dancing; and lastly, one quietly tilting their glass.

The youth nearest to the door, who had been relaxing and sipping wine on a three-seater sofa all to himself, noticed her arrival and stood up to greet [her].

“You’re late. Well, how about a toast to our first day? We’ve all already started, you see?”

“...”

[She] stood there silently, saying not a word. The youth thoughtfully filled an empty glass on the table with wine from the bottle, and urged [her] to come in.

“Perfectly expected for the lead role to arrive fashionably late. Here’s a drink for you. Come, let’s have a toast.”

The glass [she] received was full of delicious red wine. [She] faintly gazed into the red liquid wavering in her hand. As [she] silently stood there merely holding the glass, noticing her odd behavior, the rest of the group came to stare in her direction. Their gazes were kind, filled with anticipation and optimism. [She] firmly shut her

eyes, resolutely tipped the glass, and gulped down the swaying redness all at once.

“Ahh, here comes our lead role, everyone! Come on over. Why, you down your drinks quick!”

Finding no fault in [her] emptying the glass before the toast, a young man with a drunken red face and a good-natured smile... someone who had the quality about him of being the group’s leader, issuing direction to the others.

“Can we get a word from the lead role, too?”

All present turned toward [her] and gathered around.

“...Won’t you tell me the truth?”

“The truth...?”

The happy drunken leader smiling at [her] opened his eyes slightly, then blinked two or three times.

“This letter... tells about the truth of this play.”

As [she] said this, bringing the letter in her left hand up beside her face, the air in the room froze. Keeping the exact same smiles they’d had moments ago on their faces, everyone in the room stared at [her]. Not changing emotion, not even blinking, just holding their breaths, they remained still and questioned what her next action would be. After a considerable silence, a woman with a

mature air about her slowly put her beer mugs down on the table and spoke.

“Tell me, whatever do you mean by... the truth?”

In contrast to the casual nature of her words, the woman’s lips stiffened slightly.

“It has to do with us... making this script into a play.”

“And? What exactly would this be?”

“...Please, don’t play dumb. It’s all written in this letter.”

[She] suddenly turned left to glance at the white letter she held in her hand.

“Where exactly did you get it?”

“It was left on the stage.”

“Well, then... Just what does it say? May I see that for a second?”

The leader took on a stern look quite unlike before, put down his mug, and slowly approached [her].

“I believe you’re familiar with it, so I shouldn’t need to show it to you! ...If what this letter says is true, then isn’t this production considered “sacrilege” against him?”

”!”

The moment [she] spoke the word “sacrilege,” all but she trembled with nervous looks. Seeing this reaction, [she] brought a hand to

cover her mouth. Not wanting to look anyone in the eye, [she] slowly averted her gaze and hung her head.

“...So it was true... I feel... so horrible. And why did...”

Several times [she] opened her mouth to ask something, but hesitated mid-sentence, never forming a complete line. Shortly afterward, the leader-like man opened his mouth again.

“...It simply happened this way. Please understand... We -”

“I don’t want your excuses! I don’t think it’s too late yet. Please, you have to announce the truth to the world! If we do it now, it might not be too late. I’m sure... No, I’m certain we can do it over!”

“What are you talking about?! On what basis? The moment we revealed the truth, don’t you see it would be the end of us and this troupe?” The mature woman approached [her], face filling with anger.

“Who could’ve written a letter like that? Must be one of us, right...?”

A boy lounging on a single-seat sofa looked around the room as if conducting a search. But no one confessed. As he opened his mouth to continue the search for the culprit, the mature woman interrupted to continue where she left off.

“That doesn’t matter right now. What’s important is that we can’t allow the truth in that letter to be made public. You understand?”

“...Really, won’t you reconsider? We’re all friends in this together,

aren't we? You're no exception."

"Yeah! If you do something like that, it'll be real bad... Hey, reconsider! Pleeease!"

A girl worriedly looking between [her] and the others speaking spoke with a whine. Tears were faintly welling up in her eyes. The happy party mood was completely gone, and amid savage tension, attacks on [her] flew left and right. It rained terribly outside, and the heavy sound of raindrops echoed. [She] remained silent for a time, staring at the back window.

The storm of words passed, and silence drifted in. Then, making up her mind on something, [she] opened her mouth again.

"Um... Please, listen! This is really... I really mean it, this will be for the good of the troupe. I thought of the perfect way to go about this! But there are reasons why I can't tell you the details yet. But still... It'll definitely work out okay!"

"There can't be any recovering once the world knows about what's in that letter you picked up. All our dreams, all our hopes, gone. It'll be the end of us all..."

"That's not true! Please just believe me... Please!"

The leader, still looking concerned, folded his arms in thought and looked away from [her].

"Weeell, can't you tell us those details or whatnot? I wanna know, y'know, the chances of success."

A woman with a slight intellectual air went to push up her glasses, then blinking as she remembered she wasn't wearing them currently, let her gaze waver around the room to hide her mistake.

"Well, I... I can't do that yet..."

"Yet... So you mean, you'll be able to someday?", the youth pouring wine questioned.

"Just give me some time. Then..."

"Just a little time and you're *sure* you'll manage, eh?"

"W-Well... I won't know until I try... I need to confirm some things... I can't say it's certain right now, but!"

The intellectual woman twisted her neck. "Uhh..." She looked doubtful of that answer.

"Well then, you can't possibly ask us to believe you without reservation..."

"But I... why..."

[She] hung her head sadly at the mature woman's statement. This time, a woman with an immediate sense of elegance who had been silently watching the others converse sighed, stood up, and glared at [her] with a piercing gaze.

"Why, you ask...? Are you trying to claim you're in the right here? You've seen all that we put into getting this far, haven't you? How badly do you think we've sought this chance? "I can't say anything now, but we can try it again someday" - what a dream. No one would believe such a selfish claim."

“...True. It’s unfortunate, but if you can’t offer us anything worth trusting, there’s no way. We didn’t get this far on half-hearted resolve... This isn’t a game, you know?”

“...I understand. But I keep telling you, all I can say right now is to believe me!”

“It just figures a girl like you who’s hardly struggled in her life doesn’t know the meaning of “being cooperative.” No experience, ignorant to the true harshness of the world... What a pathetic softy!”

“I... I never meant... It’s true, I don’t have much of a track record, but I’m doing my best...”

Repeating herself, [she] clutched near her skirt pocket.

“Can’t you think it over once more...? Please! There’s still...”

“We keep telling you, we’re not going to believe anything if all we have is your feelings! You’re a real blockhead, aren’t you?! Sounds like you just want to abandon us right at the end, hm? Traitor!!”

“...!”

When [she] heard the word “traitor,” her large eyes widened further, and she hardened like time had stopped. In the eerie silence, rolling thunder roared, and lightning illuminated the others’ stiff, angry faces. [She] closed her eyes to think of something, then slowly opened them back up and continued.

“I understand. Then I’ll send this letter to the tabloids.”

Sharp glares fixated on [her].

“At first, I thought I could just wait until after all the performances, and present it at the final curtain call. Because I thought that might still be in time. But, no... It’s too bad. And I asked you to believe me, but none of you would. I have nothing more to say to you. Thank you for everything. Goodbye!”

[She] quickly turned around and made a break for the door behind her. The others shortly followed after [her], shouting things to make her stop, giving chase. [She] didn’t look back, running as fast as she could through the dark, unlit building.

“Wait! Hey, wait!”

“You two, take the east stairs and cover the front and back entrances! The rest of you, split up and search the second floor. Call the others when you find her. The lights are down, so she couldn’t have gotten far!”

“Got it!”

“We’ll go down!”

With the leader’s directions, the chasers scattered. In fleeing, [she] found a door, went inside, and carefully shut it to not make any sound. Holding her breath, [she] again slid her hand down to her pocket, gripping it tightly.

Tap, tap. Someone was walking close to where [she] was hiding.

“...Say, are you there?”

”!”

It was the mature woman’s voice. [She] swung the door open and sped down the hall again, going right past the stunned woman.

“Hey! She was up here! The second floor foyer! She’s headed for the grand stairs!”

The others, heeding her, could be heard one by one heading toward the grand stairs.

[She] quickly arrived at the hall leading to those stairs, but her escape routes all around were blocked. A wall behind her, the stairs in front - two downstairs, and three and two on her left and right respectively.

“Now... Enough running. We haven’t finished talking yet. Let’s go backstage.”

The leader took a step toward [her].

“Stay away...! I’m serious. Don’t come near me!”

The moonlight from the large window in behind made the beautiful gold knife glint, and [she] squinted her eyes from its radiance. The rain had now stopped. [She] thrust out her left arm with the knife, turning to point it at the leader. Gasping echoed through the hall. The leader stared, and his Adam’s apple twitched.

Yet... While the young man seemed frightened of her threat, to demonstrate that such a thing wouldn't scare him, he slowly took a step... then another toward [her], closing the distance. His cocky gait was almost predator-like. In sight of this, her hand began to tremble slightly.

The letter in her right hand went fluttering down the stairs. Down below, the boy carefully watching the others in silence snapped it up.

"We've got the letter!"

"I... It's pointless! Disposing of that letter won't change the truth!"

[She] tightened her grip on the knife by putting her empty right hand on it as well. Slowly, [she] turned its sharp point straight toward the girl downstairs. The girl shuddered with fear.

"...!! Wait! Calm down! We can talk this out!"

The leader suddenly broke into a run and leapt toward [her]. [She] was too slow to thrust the knife out, and he grabbed it in his large hands.

"Drop the knife!"

"No!"

[She] desperately shook her hands left and right to shake him off. Slowly, the others on the upper floor began to enclose on the two of them.

“Let go! Somebody...! Help!”, [she] shouted frantically.

“Ooh, this isn’t good. If someone comes by...”

“Come now, just calm down!”

“No! Somebody, HEEELP!”

“It’s too dark to see a thing! Please, enough of this dangerous nonsense!”

[She] abruptly gave up resisting. The young man stopped as well. But a moment later, [she] forcefully swung her body left. Unintentionally released from her hand, the knife sliced through his right arm, spewing a parabolic line of fresh blood. His face contorted in pain, and he faltered. [She] shook the young man away -

“YAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The girl down below screamed. [She] turned to her right and looked down, and saw the boy desperately holding to the hand of the girl trying to run up the stairs. [She] put out her right leg to run down the stairs, but a moment later, the young man grabbed both her wrists. With only his unhurt left hand, he tried to again immobilize [her].

The stairs behind, and the young man in front one-handedly holding both her wrists, [she] was completely unable to break free. The two had a tug-of-war, but [she] found herself being slowly brought closer to the young man. The others tensely and carefully approached from behind to provide him assistance.

“Give up... Come with us!”

“No... No!”

“Why?! Let’s just talk... Then we’ll...”

[She] stared at the young man in front her for a while. Tears began to pour out her eyes again.

“...Who’s the real traitor here?! I... I don’t want to trust any of you anymore!”

Instantly, his face hardened in a frightened expression. And her hands desperately pulling backward were left with nothing to be pulling back against.

“ ”

His large hand reached toward [her]. Four more hands reached from behind.

[She] thrust her hands, still holding the knife, out toward him. But [she] came just short of slicing anything but empty space.

The brief moment of her falling down the stairs seemed to play out in slow motion, and everyone froze as they watched, as if being eternally subjected to a scene from an everlasting nightmare. [She] lay face-up, unmoving, at the base of the grand stairs, the light gone from her now-blank eyes. Plunged deep in her chest was the golden knife [she] wouldn’t let go of to the very end.

Applause echoed through the silent hall. The first scene of a truly tragic performance.

Chapter 1: The Lost Libretto

“Hah, hah, hahh...”

I ran breathless down the path to the main street of West End. “Late” - every time that ominous word arose in my mind, I took a deep breath to drive it off and calm myself down, but it wasn’t working out very well. I’d gone to bed early last night knowing I had to prepare for today’s performance. But I suppose I was too nervous to fall asleep, even as the date changed... I did finally manage to drift off as the sky was brightening, but I was woken by a terrible dream.

A dream where someone died from an accident during the play - even the vague details were fading now, so I really couldn’t remember it at all. Either way, witnessing that purely horrific tragedy woke me up with a start. I pulled the covers up again to get some more sleep, but the nightmare still lingering in my mind, I only got in a few light naps. When I next woke up, the meeting time was fast encroaching.

Why today, of all days? Why was the one day I slept in late the one that could very well be the most important of my life? And to think that I *always* fell asleep before midnight, no matter how late I tried to stay up... I’m an idiot, such an IDIOT! I mentally berated myself for the nth time today, cursing my stupidity.

Main Street finally came into sight. There were crowds all around the area, despite morning rush hour being hours ago. In fact,

“morning” was nearly over, and yet this normally not-particularly-busy area was, just for today, flooded with people - the street, the alleys, even the back streets. Cutting through the inordinately large crowds, I kept bumping into people, apologizing, and being jostled this way and that. I was in quite a hurry, but alas, all the people made it difficult to get anywhere. Not good... At this rate, I really will be late -

Whump!

Suddenly, something black blocked my vision.

“Wah!”

I smacked into something, knocking me magnificently on my bottom. Rubbing my pained behind, I reopened my eyes shut by the impact. Someone had forcefully bumped into me. The man, who’d popped out into the main street from a narrow alley, smoothly picked up the antique silk hat that had fallen off his head and put it back on. He extended a hand to me, still sitting on the ground.

“Terribly sorry, miss. I was in such a hurry, I wasn’t looking where I was going. My apologies. Are you hurt?”

“Ah... No, I’m, I’m fine...”

I felt like I’d slipped into a story from a distant land; he held his hand out to me in such a reverent, elegant way, as a prince would to a princess. I nervously grabbed it, and he lifted me up. The unique fairytale impression he and his actions had given me in mere

moments started to feel somehow embarrassing, so I couldn't look him in the face. But I snuck a sidelong glance, and observed him to be a tall, slim gentleman, with a black suit and silk hat.

"That's good. I'm one to talk after crashing into you, but please be careful, miss. Quite a few rubbernecks about this morning..."

"Rubbernecks...?"

"Indeed. Have you seen it? There was a fire at Harrods. You see the western sky filling up with dark smoke? And it is quite a large department store... It's taking a while to put the fire out. There also seem to be many people on this street for some kind of event today. So not only are there people running from the fire, but also rubbernecks seeing what all the hubbub is about. Such a noisy morning. Let's hope the damages don't get any worse."

"...So there was a fire..."

I somehow hadn't noticed at all in my hurrying. As I acknowledged how that would explain the crowds today, I recalled the reason people always called me "slow-witted" and sighed again. I always had a problem of becoming too focused on one thing and losing sight of everything else.

When I calmed myself and listened closely, I heard the word "fire" being shouted here and there, and the unending sirens of firetrucks in the distance. And when I looked up at the sky to the west, while I couldn't see the fire, black smoke continuously poured up into it. It was more bizarre for someone on this street to *not* realize there was a fire - such was the area enveloped in that particular tumult

brought about by one. Following up my blunder of oversleeping on this day that could hardly be any more important, now I'd run straight through this chaos without even noticing there was a fire... My self-loathing resurfaced.

"So you see, you should stay away from that area if possible. It's quite dangerous."

"Yes... Thank you, sir..."

"You really never know what can happen. It's all too common for what seems like a perfectly peaceful day to be switched out for a living nightmare. Or for a fire like this to stop you in your tracks on an important day, hm?"

"Ah... Um, I'm sorry. I was the one running and not looking... You must be in a hurry."

"No, no, that's not what I meant at all. There's a play I really wish to see today, so that's why I was hurrying. I bought special seats, so even if I'm a little late, there's still time before the show begins. Yet to arrive early, have a glass of wine on the foyer while I flip through the pamphlet, imagine this and that as I wander for a bit, and finally enjoy the main event to the fullest... That is what I truly look forward to. Still, the slight delay brought about by this fire won't have a significant effect on the course of my life. The ones truly pained are the owners of the department store, the customers, the staff. Such a shame... Yet such a common tragedy, isn't it?"

"...It really is..."

This person said some very interesting things. I came to suspect each line he spoke had an important message hidden behind it. His

every word and action seemed to induce a feeling of wanting to hear what was next.

“Well, though I certainly prefer comedies to tragedies. What else can I say in times like these? War and military expansion, mechanized industry and stale amusement, and on top of it all, a prohibition boom from the continent. Our great ancestors taught that beer moistens the dry journey of life, that it is the tears of angels, but this has been forgotten by the empty-headed politicians of our time. And this is why people get so fiercely upset, starting wars and trading pie-in-the-sky theories. The gloss, so to speak, is leaving people’s lives... Truly a shame... Well, never mind that. Hm...? Say, have we... met somewhere before?”

After speaking at length while gesturing as if a spotlight were on him, the man peered at my face and gave his head a slight tilt.

“Ah...”

Maybe he noticed. After all, my face had been put up all around town.

“No, I think it’s our first meeting. I do have a pretty ordinary face... I get it all the time... Ahaha.”

I tried to dodge the question, but the gentleman still pondered, staring at me with eyes hidden behind his bangs. If we talked any longer, he might find out who I was. It would be very bad to get a crowd around me in a place that was so crowded to begin with. He

observed me for a while as I awkwardly let my gaze wander elsewhere. Suddenly, I felt I saw his eyes light up, despite being theoretically invisible behind his thick bangs.

“...What a magnificent bracelet. Rather old and used, it appears...”

“T-Thank you. I know it’s really worn out now... But it’s very important to me...”

“I see... Take good care of it. They say objects come to possess a consciousness of their own over a long period of time. I’m sure your ancestors... and your grandmother, will watch over you always.”

“...!”

I looked up in surprise. But indeed, his glaring eyes were obscured by his hair, and I couldn’t see their expression. His kind voice had a curious resonance. And he’d certainly just mentioned my grandmother... How would he know this was from my grandmother? Was he an acquaintance of hers...?

“Er, why...”

Just then, I heard the bell of the nearby clock tower ring. The heavy metal *booong* rang out twelve times.

I listened to it briefly, but remembered at once. Oh, no. I got so absorbed in what he was saying, I completely forgot what I was in such a hurry over. The meeting time was 12 PM -

“Oh my... That time already. I guess I spoke a little long.”

The gentleman rolled up his left sleeve and checked the antique watch underneath.

“Thank you for telling me about the fire! I just remembered I was in a hurry... Today’s a very important day... I need to go!”

“Yes, take care... Have a magnificent day, miss. I should be going as well.”

I quickly bowed to the unfamiliar gentleman and left him, taking off running. Maybe he really was an acquaintance of grandma’s... I wanted to talk just a little more, but I was dragged back into the unavoidable reality of already being late.

Plus, if we had kept on talking, he would have noticed who I was. That I was the Cinderella of West End, performing in a brand new story today. All of a sudden, the reality hit me again. Happiness and a little bit of shyness welled up in me, and I couldn’t resist grinning. The walls of the main street I was running through, the streetlights, the billboards. My brilliant smile was plastered all over town. Posters of me, the lead role in the play that would be put on tonight. I met eyes with the girl smiling so brilliantly in the photo. Refilled with vigor, I ran faster than ever down the path to the theater.

As I swung open the door to green room #1, I found three actors already there, elegantly enjoying an after-lunch tea time. I checked the clock on the wall; it was a little past 12:30. The meeting time

was supposed to be 12.

Needing to squash my fear, I squeezed the handkerchief in my skirt pocket. It wasn't a good-luck charm or anything; since I was little, I just had an unconscious habit of reaching for it when I was particularly stressed or afraid.

The soft feel of the cloth calmed me down a little. Though still out of breath, I felt I had to apologize immediately, so I practically made a 90-degree angle with my body and shouted from the bottom of my stomach:

"Um...! I'm so sorry!! T-That I'm a whole thirty minutes late!!"

"So you are, Miku. Did you sleep in?"

Kaito, the leader who organized the company's actors, approached me not angrily, but with a wide smile. As I continued looking down at the floor, he stooped into my field of view and handed me a towel.

"...U-Um."

"You should wipe off your sweat first. You'll catch a cold."

"Thank you..."

"Then once you've calmed down, you should get changed quickly."

"Okay..."

All three of the actors already had their makeup fully done, and were dressed in their costumes for the main event.

“My, my... He’s sparing no expense, I see.”

“Miss Luka...! G-Good morning! I-I’m so sorry I’m late!”

Luka sat in the most luxurious seat in the back, one situated by the window with a lot of exposure to sunlight, and she spoke languidly as she raised her eyes to look at me. Her beautiful long pink hair glittered in the light of the sun now high in the sky. She was fiercely beautiful today, as ever - as she wearily swept aside her forelocks, the sight gave me the picturesque impression of a moon goddess mistakenly winding up at a sun god’s tea party.

After giving a quick greeting to all three actors, wiping myself down with the towel, I sat in the cheapest chair nearest to the door and opened up my bag. I’d checked it once before leaving in the morning, but I had to make sure I hadn’t forgotten anything. For instance, I had to be sure I brought back the props I’d taken home for practice. As I rummaged through my bag, Meiko, who’d been reading a newspaper on the sofa beside Kaito, came over and sat on the three-seater sofa opposite me.

“Here you are, ice lemon tea. Hot outside, wasn’t it? Did you sleep well last night?”

“T-Thank you! Um... Actually, I was kind of too nervous to sleep much. I almost got to bed toward dawn, but then I had a scary dream... Then I fell asleep two more times... Then I noticed it was nearly 12... So yes, I slept late...”

Meiko’s expressions and actions emanated elegance and maturity, so one might think she was hard to approach. But in truth, she was

rather meddlesome, and would candidly interact with anyone. Even with me being a newcomer who had only been in the troupe for half a year, and her being such a mature individual, she'd pour tea for me and actively start conversations with me all the time. And whenever I felt shameful and nervous about it, she'd shoot me a playful smile and naturally diffuse my worries... She was a very warm person.

"I see... That's rough. This morning's been such a noisy one. First with the passing of the prohibition bill, then the congestion in the streets after the fire at Harrods..."

"Y-Yes..."

Meiko spoke with a very pained expression, like the end of the world was coming, much like she had while reading the newspaper - perhaps because she was reminding herself of it again.

"But it's all right. You're not the only one who's late."

"I'm not? Ah, uh, I'll take this tea."

I took the cold glass and gulped it down. My parched throat was filled with just the right amount of bitterness from the faintly sour tea. Delicious. The spring plants were only just budding, so the nights were still chilly, but it was a warm enough season to work up a sweat from running. A cup of cold lemon tea after that exercise was a cup of bliss. I noticed Kaito had come over, and he sat beside Meiko.

"Hey, Mei-pie? I'd like to have some lemon tea poured by you,

myself.”

“It is getting rather hot with the sun out, isn’t it? Very well, very well. But haven’t I told you enough times? You really have to stop calling me that, you lecher.”

“Eh? So cruel of you. Let’s stick with “gentleman,” please. Besides, aren’t you and I on that level?”

“Please don’t make comments that’ll be misconstrued. Miku, he’s always like this. As soon as he lays eyes on a woman, he’s polite as can be, then before you know it, he’s seducing her. You should watch out.”

Meiko slowly stood up and got chilled lemon tea from the fridge, then poured it into the cold glass on the table.

“Ahaha... She’s harsh. But this is practically how we say hi.”

“A greeting like that will never catch on in this country, Mr. Gentleman. Here you are.”

“Thanks.”

Kaito ignored Meiko’s remark and put on a kind-hearted grin as he reached for the tea she poured. The movement of his hand resembled that of a high-ranking noble or royal, having a unique elegance to it. Sometimes I thought that maybe Kaito planned out every action he performed from start to finish. Even when it came to such a simple action as taking a glass, I could imagine the setting of a royal palace behind him.

“Hm...? Miku, do you want a refill?”

“Uh...?”

“Well, you were just looking at my glass so passionately. Unless, don’t tell me... You were looking at me?”

He winked at me. Picturing how I must have been spacing out and watching his every action filled me with embarrassment. That’s not it - it’s true I was watching passionately, but not really at him, just wondering about that sense of refinement that he engendered... I wondered how to best convey that, but I just couldn’t find the right words.

“Ahh... Er, um, well...”

“Yaaawn... What makes you think she was looking *at* anything? She always has a habit of looking through everything. My, it’s like she does it on purpose...”

Luka, watching our conversation from across the room, spoke up drowsily, stifling a yawn.

“Miss Luka?”

“Luka’s eyesight never ceases to amaze. Miku, are you really that curious about how I drink a drink? I feel like you’re always staring my way whenever I’m eating or drinking anything.”

“Ahh! Um... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be that obvious... That must feel awkward.”

“No, as long as it’s not a time when I’m not looking so stylish, I absolutely welcome any woman to stare passionately at me.”

“(Was I really staring that intensely...?) B-But really, so many of your movements, even off the stage, just have this elegance to

them... You almost remind me of a royal or a noble, or something. So I just get caught up watching.”

“Hm...? I-Is that... right? W-Well, I’m glad. That makes me a fine gentleman, doesn’t it?”

“Yes! A gentleman... or, well, let’s see... Maybe more like a butler?”

“B... Butler...”

Kaito lowered his head, heartbroken. Luka and Meiko burst out laughing seeing this unfold.

“A-And here I thought you were going a good direction there... I guess my eyesight isn’t quite perfect. Heehee...”

Luka must have found it really hilarious, as she continued to laugh even as she spoke, then put milk into a fresh cup of coffee poured by Meiko. Come to think of it, this was different from when I’d had drinks with her on the foyer before. I got curious, so I asked.

“Um... Miss Luka, didn’t you tell me the other day that you only drank your coffee black...?”

“Hm? Ahh... That’s right, I did say that. You’ll recall that was when our sponsor was there, yes? I figured black was better for my image. But really, it’s too bitter for me to care for it at all. I like my alcohol, I like my sweets, and I just hate anything bitter.”

“Oh, wow... You really looked like you were enjoying it, so I was so sure...”

“Oh? Well, I am an actress. Of course I should be able to pull that off. As should you. This is the Burlet Company, you know? All our

performances must be perfect, or they won't be recognized as Burlet."

"Burlet..."

The Burlet Company - our acting troupe.

The troupe came into being a century ago by the hand of the legendary playwright Mr. Burlet, who began a golden age of theater here in West End. A troupe that performed Burlet's many masterworks, with a long-standing tradition of making no compromises in props, sets, stage directions, lighting, music, acting, costumes, anything that comprised the play's reception in order to invite the audience into an unreal world of theater.

Even while modernization, mechanization, and the recent movie boom put a shadow on the business of theater, our troupe retained the same craftsmanship and spirit since the very day it was founded. Certainly, it had lost its former vigor, and didn't have very good financial prospects these days. Yet amid the shift toward movies, there still existed a few troupes like the Burlet Company continuing to uphold the charm of the stage. For the sake of the passionate theater and Burlet fans who came to see them.

I admired the plays the legendary Mr. Burlet wrote, and aspired to be an actress. When I was little, my grandmother took me from my rural home village all the way here to distant West End to see my first Burlet Company play. It was one of his most well-known works, "The Silence of the Snowy Night." They never dropped any real snow on the set, yet soon enough, I began to feel the illusion of

being lost in a silver world sealed within heavy snow. For days after the play, during day and night, the world of the play lingered with me.

Ever since, I became absolutely fascinated with Burlet's plays. Always carrying the dream of becoming an actress to someday perform his works, I moved up to West End a year ago. Working part-time as a live-in employee at a bakery on the edge of West End, I saved up to see the Burlet Company's performances.

Luka, the company's overpoweringly beautiful star actor who also worked as a model. Kaito, the tenured leader of the troupe's actors, who served as both an actor and a stage manager. Meiko, the older actress renowned for her precise, finely-detailed performances. I was enthralled by their acting and went to see them again and again, striving to practice my own craft when I could find the time between work. I had no money, so I couldn't go to acting school... but I watched real plays and imitated the actors. Everything else, I filled in with my vivid imagination from years of playing by myself.

About three months into that way of life, there came a turning point. Burlet's illusory posthumous work: the script of "Crazy ∞ nighT." Nearly a century ago, the title alone was revealed, and the script was thought to have been lost without ever being performed. The news of it finally being found in the Burlet Company's underground cellar spread worldwide in the blink of an eye. Every news outlet snapped up the story, and paid the declining troupe heed with grand headlines like "Long-Standing Troupe Shown Chance for Revival With Discovery of Phantom Libretto," and "An

Infusion of Burlet for the Troupe's Financial Troubles? Now That's Dramatic!"

To accompany this miraculous event, the Burlet Company announced a special audition to recruit a new member. The best audition would be given the lead role in the lost, posthumous play; an actor could ask for no greater honor. But I knew it was too soon for me; while I had practiced alone for many years, having never actually stood on a stage before, there was no reason to expect that I would get the part. So I just agonizingly stared at the audition pamphlet for days. However, the proprietor of the bakery decided to put my name in herself, and suddenly told me this fact three days before the audition.

At first, I couldn't believe she'd do that, and thought about not even showing up to the audition knowing I didn't stand a chance. But all the bakery workers said "Challenge yourself, and if it doesn't work out, you can try harder next time," convincing me to give it a try on a puny amount of courage. And somehow, I got the part. In that moment, I was filled with unspeakable surprise and joy.

Maybe the fact that I happened to be born in the same village as Burlet was the clincher for the judges. A single ray of hope came down upon the struggling troupe - the lost libretto had been discovered, and for its first performance, the lead role would be played by a total unknown who just moved here, a village girl with the same birthplace as Burlet. A truly dramatic, Cinderella-esque story. That anecdote alone would be pivotal in getting the audience's interest. So perhaps I was chosen simply to be the face

of their advertising.

It had only been half a year since I entered the troupe, but I wanted to quickly get my acting on par with the rest of the main cast, so I'd devoted myself to practice. I studied the others' acting and adopted techniques from them, and to learn more about plays, I did all I could to help in the creation of props and sets, with lighting, with acoustics, with being a prompter. I even helped the ticket sellers and guides out front and learned how to interact with visitors. But my skill still didn't even go above their socks.

"...I..."

Faced now with the main event, I was suddenly welling up with fear. I wondered why I hadn't noticed it before. In just a few hours, I would have to perform in the production of Burlet's lost libretto, the very first production, as the lead role at that. The Burlet stage, to anyone who devoted themselves to theater, was a holy place, a final destination. Maybe seeing nothing but that dream come true made me subconsciously not think about the fear that came with it actually happening.

An audience bursting at the seams with anticipation, surely filling the house; famous, first-class actors; a set made to thoroughly imitate reality. Was it really okay for me, with my total lack of redeeming features, to be in the middle of it all? Doubt and hesitation filled me. I began to tremble, and my pulse beat loudly. I felt the reality slowly thickening in front of me. The tension was crushing... I wanted to run out of here.

“Hey, Luka? Don’t make people nervous right before showtime. It’s a delicate time. Look, she’s shaking. It’s enough that she’s debuting as the lead of such a production, so she must be especially nervous now... Listen, Miku? It’s okay if you mess up. We’ll do everything we can to support you, so just try to take it easy.”

“That’s right. Even if you forget a line, that’s what the prompter’s there for. You’re a newcomer, and the audience should know that much. In fact, for a newcomer, a perfect performance isn’t as endearing as one which has a few beginner mistakes here and there. Why, it could have more appeal that way. Besides, today is only the first day. The show will go on tomorrow, and the day after. Take it at your leisure.”

Meiko and Kaito gave me kind, sympathetic encouragement. Indeed, it was a three-act play where one act would be performed each day. The veterans knew everything there was to know about plays, and they told me that for a play structured like this, most opinions would be decided based on the quality of the final act. So even if mistakes were made toward the beginning, by the last act you could know your part and the audience, and make up for it by putting on your best performance there.

Even so, Luka was still right. Everything had to be perfect, or it wasn’t a Burlet play. I desperately lacked that kind of talent.

Mr. Burlet sought perfection from his productions. While he was alive, even prodigies and veterans were told they couldn’t perform

in his plays if they didn't meet his standards. Surely no one would expect a lead player in this troupe, which had always kept to that tradition, to think herself unworthy of the position. And many plausible legends had been passed down, as well.

For instance, it was said that if any actors omitted a large part from one of his scripts, or adlibbed their own additions... those actors would soon vanish from the stage. Two or three decades ago, when the war was going strong, a lot of cultural heritage and records were lost, so it was hard to know the truth or origins of such rumors.

But where there's smoke, there's fire. Any who profanes a Burlet play will meet an unhappy death... That legend was still believed like a superstition by no small number of people, including those in the Burlet Company. So they dedicated themselves to following the scripts to the letter, ignored harmonizing with others to focus on their own acting, and never adlibbed.

But for an actor to die because they made a mistake acting out one of his plays? It sounded like a serious embellishment to me. Burlet didn't seem as strict and scary a person as his company seemed to speak of him... is what I thought, at least. Because he...

Staring at one of the few personal effects he'd left in his hometown, the worn red bracelet now on my left wrist, I sighed quietly enough for no one to notice it.

"Sigh... Looks like I'm being made out as bullying the newcomer. I

get stage fright too, you know? To any actor, the Burlet stage is both something to aspire to, and the embodiment of fear. In fact, I still need to mentally... no, never mind."

Luka tiresomely defended herself from the remarks made against her by the older two. Looking at her face, you naturally couldn't see a hint of nervousness, but perhaps even a star like her could get nervous on stage after all. And I had no idea what it was, but she seemed a little... no, no, she looked plenty mentally-prepared too.

"True... When you put it that way, we're all nervous. This time more than ever, it's something we can't mess up."

"...Yeah."

Silence came to the room. It was tranquil, with warm sunlight coming through the large window reaching up to the second floor terrace. Why, I wonder, when there was a strange tension that didn't match that at all? I felt like the tension they felt and whatever I was feeling might be somehow different. I was feeling it "again," I realized - at times, I had the impression that I still wasn't being allowed into their circle. And this was certainly one of those times.

Bang!

The door to the green room slammed open with a loud sound that broke the momentary silence. The force was so much that it

bounced back into its opener, so a painful *wham* sound followed.

“OWWWWWWWWWWW!”

“Sigh...”

The smallish girl Rin emerged from behind the large door, holding her forehead in pain. Beside her was her twin brother Len, who’d watched the whole thing from nearby. His expression didn’t change one bit; he just gave a little sigh.

“Owowowowow... wh! M-Morning, guys! I guess we were a little late? I’m SORry!”

“Not often you two are late. I suppose the fire crowded the roads?”

“E-Eheh... a little, MAYbe.”

“Hm...? Rin, did you get a bump on your head? Let me see that.”

Kaito approached Rin, worried about the blow to her forehead, but she backed away in surprise. I felt like I saw the bag hung over her shoulder fidget a little, but maybe it was just me.

“What’s wrong...? You look less energetic than usual.”

“Eh?! N-No, uh-hh, well... we’ve been getting stopped by enthusiastic fans all day... eHE.”

“Fans...? Those bodyguards? They’re strict about their rules, so unless someone slipped up, I wouldn’t think they’d come talk to you in the middle of town...”

Rin’s bodyguards, as Meiko called them, were a group of people who frequented the theater to a zealous degree. Thanks to their

rigorous leadership, they had ironclad rules against bothering the actors in any way, and followed them well. I'd definitely never heard of them bothering Rin while she was on the move.

"Oh, that's not it. I, uh... I meant Len's."

"..."

Rin glanced toward her brother. Len was still expressionless and said nothing, slowly closing his eyes.

"Ah, if it's Len's fans... I wouldn't put it past them. They're so radical, they're like a religious group..."

"Certainly true. And hard to turn down if they stop you in town, as well. They're all bigshots, after all."

"My, how nice. I wish you'd introduce me to one of them. Quite an impressive gathering of men in Len's fanbase."

Len was reticent as always, just standing there with a nonchalant look. But was it just me who saw him as displeased?

An impressive gathering of men - indeed, while Len had many female fans, the men outnumbered them by far. And for whatever reason, many of his fervent fans were gentlemen with fame and fortune - important politicians, businessmen, performers like him. They wouldn't normally reveal their hobby publicly, but they would send bombastic bouquets and expensive presents to Len's dressing room every show, and would apparently casually talk to him if he was spotted in town.

Bigshots from all fields supported Len as sponsors, Rin's supporters formed a passionate fanclub, and Luka worked as a model to do promotion, focusing on gaining popularity among young women. It was no exaggeration to say that these things helped fill the troupe's coffers amid its financial difficulties. All the members of the main cast had their own fanbases, but certain long-time members like Meiko and Kaito, with their reliable acting prowess, were the real face of the company. I'd heard the staff claim that the troupe as we now knew it was kept alive by the efforts of the seven main cast members.

"That aside... Already in "play mode," Rin? You're always quick with that."

"Eh...? AhaHAHAha! Yes, I'm all PREpared! HeeHEE!"

I thought I felt Rin was acting a little different from usual. Apparently, she had already put herself in the world of the play. In tonight's play, she had the role of the Doll Girl, and her acting certainly did suggest a doll that had come to life. Assuming a stoic pose, her natural acting talents and her boundless effort combined to create the image of a doll worth calling "real."

The Doll Girl, established as having a cheery naiveté, but just a little bit of foolishness. The doll speaking and moving, of course, demanded a performance that oozed eeriness and madness. Maybe even her hitting her head on the door had been on purpose, as practice for her "foolish" side.

"I just REMemberED, I have busiNESS in green ROOM numBER

two... gotta GO!”

With that, the Doll Girl, Rin, ran down the hall hurriedly. Once Rin was gone, Len came in and quietly shut the door, then began greeting everyone. He seemed apologetic about being late. After greeting the others in order of tenure, he came to greet me, the newcomer, as well.

“Morning.”

“G-G-Good morning!”

“...”

He was two years my younger, but had been in the troupe for five years. Len had become popular with his sister Rin as twin prodigies, and they served as main cast members of the company ever since. Despite his age, he was very shy. Since he already had an aura of a dignified, bigshot actor, I was always nervous about talking to him.

“You don’t have to be so nervous. Just treat it like usual.”

“Eh...?”

Saying nothing else, he quickly went over to Meiko. I supposed that was his advice. I’d never talked with him at all outside of rehearsal. Neither he nor I would start a conversation with the other, and I felt like we only said a few words to each other when we happened to end up together. And yet he showed concern and talked to me. So happy...

I felt his casual words of concern slowly undoing the tension in me. I

had been chosen as the lead role despite my lack of ability, so I was sure they felt resentment and irritation toward me. But the people of the troupe treasured their bonds with their companions and made them feel at home, which was very kind of them. It made me think how I wanted to become a part of that myself soon.

“Well, enough chitchat. You two go to your dressing rooms and get ready with your makeup and costumes. There’s not much time left, you know?”

“Y-Yes!”

Hurried along by Meiko, Len and I quickly left green room #1.

By the time I was done with my makeup, changing, and doing some quiet reciting to myself, it was already past 3 when I returned to the green room. Only two hours until the show. The others were gathered in the room doing final script checks and rehearsing tricky scenes. But... there were two still yet to show.

“Hey, where’s you-know-who? Don’t tell me she’s not here yet?”

“Seems not. I even stressed to her yesterday that she couldn’t be late at any cost... My, how worrying.”

“You-know-who” who Len and Meiko were talking about... It could be none other.

“Just unbelievable. Writers are hopeless, I tell you. In the eyes of

society, it's actresses who are considered troublemakers, but the truth is they're nothing compared to writers. Because we're *punctual* - we have to be. Being just a few seconds off on the stage is fatal for an actor."

"Ah yes, I suppose she always has been bad with deadlines... But I hear she's at work on a mystery story right now, approaching the part where the butler reaches the climax or whatnot... She's been chipping away at it every night. I'm sure she'll be here soon. As late as she's been, she's never canceled last-minute."

Luka didn't look surprised at all as she spoke ill of *she who still wasn't here*. And then Meiko said some things I didn't quite get - I couldn't tell if she was worried or not, or if it was a follow-up to Luka or not.

"Um... What about Mr. Gack?"

"Gack? He's been here for quite some time. Though I believe he's still down below, working on the set since this morning. Come to think of it... Yes, he should be long finished with that by now, shouldn't he?"

"Meg truly never changes... Of course she'd cause such trouble at an important time like this. Having two doofuses in this script makes it hard to get a word in. And isn't the lady of a wealthy family meant to be the pinnacle of elegance? There's no elegance in a lady who responds to each and every folly of a bothersome maid."

"My, you're right there. Typically, the image of a diligent maid who must suffer the antics of a rambunctious lady would stick better."

“Hmm... At the same time, the somewhat unusual setting may be a breath of fresh air. A moody aristocrat with a hobby of collection inherits an old, eerie mansion from his grandfather. He lives there with his wife, a boozehound who enjoys partying, and between them is their selfish adopted daughter. Two servants attend to them. While one is an stubbornly serious butler, like a condensed ball of common sense... the other is his opposite, a troublesome maid who exaggerates and makes mountains from molehills. Then we have a slightly slow, but energetic girl, and a cynical, cruel boy... both of whom are dolls. And lastly, a mysterious village girl who comes to visit the mansion...”

“When you lay it out like that, it certainly is an *odd setting*, isn’t it. Kaito and I being married, and Luka being our daughter, even if she’s an adoptive one... Though our personalities, at least, aren’t too distanced from the parts.”

Meiko swung her head up and down, nodding to herself. Kaito and Luka’s faces briefly twitched and they glanced at one another, tilting their heads with a bit of awkwardness.

Looking at this play’s cast, it was as Meiko said: no one was playing a character particularly unlike their actual personality. Even the part I was given, the mysterious Villager. Not only had I made a sudden entrance into the troupe, the character description of “withdrawn, introspective, and slow-witted” seemed a perfect fit for me. What a bizarre series of coincidences.

“Everyone... You all seem so suited for the roles in this play. I mean,

Miss Meg even has the same interest in classical mysteries as her role. Actually, she lent me this detective novel the other day and pushed me to read it, and... Well, the protagonist was a maid who worked at a mansion, and the way she magnificently cracked all kinds of cases that happened around the mansion... It kind of reminded me of this play. All these coincidences make it seem like destiny to me... I think it's just wonderful!"

As soon as I said this, everyone turned to look at me. Their faces could be interpreted as surprised, or caught off-guard. It was pretty awkward... After all, I had clearly implied that the character descriptions of "moody," "boozehound," "selfish," "stubborn," "annoying," "stupid," and "cruel" were "so suited" to their real personalities. That must have seemed the pinnacle of rudeness to them. I felt a pang of regret for not noticing until after I had already said it.

"Ah, erm..."

As I stumbled over myself in confusion, Meiko threw me a bone, albeit probably struggling to keep herself from shaking her head and sighing.

"Destiny, hm... Heehee. I see where you're coming from, but it's really just coincidence. Actually, once we found the script, we just naturally distributed the roles that we thought would be easiest for us to play. For instance, don't you think Gack's personality is a better fit for a butler than Kaito? True, you said he was butler-esque earlier. But a lewd butler would be, well..."

“Um, Mei-pie... You can’t just sum up my whole personality as “lewd”... That’s a little too concise...”

“Wouldn’t that be something? I do feel like I’ve never seen a lewd butler in any plays before.”

“Even you, Luka...? W-Well, anyway, a *few* commonalities with our parts just makes it that much easier to perfect our performances. Though, Rin and Len’s parts aren’t even human... but they are naturals, so they can master any part. Doll, animal, anything.”

“It’s said that great actors are capable of playing any part... but that doesn’t mean it’s not difficult to play a role completely distanced from who you really are. I happen to like drinking, but someone who hated alcohol wouldn’t be able to fill this role, I feel. If you don’t have a love for the stuff, playing a part that indulges in it just feels a bit fake, you know? So I’d just say this was a suitable role for me.”

Meiko gave a convincing explanation, and I found myself nodding. I could sense an unconcealable aura of despair around her brought about by this morning’s news that, inspired by prohibition laws on the continent, a provisional bill to that effect had been passed in our country as well. It gave a kind of credence to her words.

“Not to mention it’s a Burlet script; those are practically legendary in that regard. Nothing would sway Mr. Burlet. He wouldn’t make any compromises in selecting actors for his plays... In fact, it’s said many of his works had their productions delayed until suitable actors appeared.”

Meiko poured Kaito a new cup of tea and put it on the table. Kaito thanked her and flipped through the script in his hands, doing some final checks.

“...It’s always best when you have a fool to play the fool... That’s what they say, Rin.”

“Ohhh? Is that right?”

Having finished with her makeup and costume, Rin was back and sitting on the sofa, hiding in Kaito’s shadow. She was relaxing to the fullest in a position that looked like she was clinging to his left arm, passionately reading a magazine. Said magazine was unfolded in front of Kaito as he drank his tea, so it seemed like it would be bothersome for him. But the two must have really gotten along, as Kaito didn’t particularly complain, and the scene quickly became familiar.

Previously, I’d seen the two of them together in a similar way, and accidentally let it slip that they reminded me of a father and his daughter, which got them both very angry. Kaito said “I’m not old enough to have a child this big,” and Rin insisted “My body may still be playing catch-up, but in mind, I’m already a fine adult!” There were also semi-criminal rumors about them being lovers, but the others told me it was purely based on how affectionately Kaito looked after Rin.

“...It’s nice that the idiot can enjoy herself.”

“Rin, your brother’s making fun of you. ...Hellooo? Idiot?”

“...Hm? Idiot...? Luka! What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“It was Len who said it.”

“...Len!!”

Rin turned her eyes from the magazine to glare at Len sitting across from her.

“I was just saying, you can really get into your role this time.”

“...You’re saying that like I’m really an idiot! I’m just PLAYing an idiot, SEE? It’s acting! I’m perfectly playing THE part of a STUpid doll, THAT’s all! Because REALly, I’m much smarTER than you, LEN! Right, KaiTO?”

“Uh...? Y-Yes, of course... yes.”

“Seeeeee? Got it now, brother?”

“Right... (There’s no way Kaito was even listening...)”

“I think you can get rather into your cynical, badmouthing role as well, Len.”

“...Sigh. That’s not a compliment.”

Not amused by Luka’s comment, Len grabbed the teacup Meiko placed for him.

“Well, you’re such naturals that of course you can take up any role. Even acting as dolls brought to life... It’s so real it can give me chills. Like the other night, after rehearsal, I was walking down the dark halls to lock up... and when I passed by the reception area, which should have been empty... there was a life-size doll sitting there, grinning. I was so aghast, I couldn’t speak. Then the doll began to

move, stiffly and slowly. Before I knew it, it was over the fence, slowly, slooowly taking steps toward me... I was paralyzed with fear. The doll arrived right in front of me, and I thought I was done for... When suddenly, it cackled loudly. I was truly struck with terror... I thought my heart stopped.”

“Heh heh. Kaito had this really funny scream when I went up and spooked him. “Wyaaaaah!” Like a little girl.”

“That’s not a nice prank, Rin. You should count yourself lucky I was your target.”

“It’s not a prank, it’s practice! I was testing to see if I was convincing. Although since you seemed to have absolutely no idea it was me, I went all the way. Don’t worry, I wouldn’t do it to anyone else!”

“Who could possibly tell in the dark like that...? And... And was it really for practice?”

Kaito’s smile twitched a little. He often was made to be a part of Rin’s acting practice, but in reality, many of the things she did were just pranks. Kaito and Rin were often together, an especially friendly duo among the whole troupe. But for him to not notice who she was at such a close range, and with their level of familiarity, was a real testament to her ability to fully assume her doll role. I knew I would never, with any amount of effort, reach those heights. I thrust my hand into my pocket and squeezed the handkerchief within.

“That handkerchief... What an awful design. Let me see it.”

Luka suddenly spoke, and I stared back at her with a start. She assumed a pose of putting her right hand on her hip and slightly bending her neck back, as if looking down on the person before her; it was her Pose #18, a big hit with fans. But most of the times she assumed this pose, it meant she was displeased, so I prepared myself for whatever should could possibly want to say. Like with Len, she rarely spoke directly to me, so I was nervous. I took my time pulling out the handkerchief sticking out of my skirt pocket and hesitantly handed it to her.

“...When did you buy this?”

“Er... About a year ago...”

“Hmm. Green and white polkadots... Isn’t that a bit childish? It doesn’t suit you at all. This is the “in” color right now. Use this instead.”

Luka swiftly pulled out a handkerchief from her expensive bag and handed it straight to me. Without thinking, I took it in my palms.

“Huh...? This is... new... C-Can I...?”

“Of course! That *is* what I said. You should at least pick up on that much.”

The handkerchief Luka handed me was totally out of my price range, a silk handkerchief with the logo for a famous brand. It had a motif of fresh green leaves with light pink roses on top, with golden embroidery and beads around the edges - a simple, yet fully realized and elegant design. I supposed it was all handmade, as each and every part was carefully-crafted, nothing the same, as if to

keep the owner from ever growing bored. If I wasn't careful, I could get lost in it.

"Are you just going to keep staring? You're embarrassing me. Put it away already."

"Uh... sorry! Thank you so much! I'll take good care of it!"

"...It's really nothing at all."

Luka swept her head to the side. Maybe it wasn't a big deal to her. But to me, it was a precious gift from a star I'd always aspired to. Even after half a year in the troupe, I must have been unable to let go of my "fan" mentality, because being recognized in this way made my heart dance.

"Hmm, that handkerchief... Gosh, you're being as difficult as always, Luka. You big ice queen!"

"W-What's that, Rin...? Ice...? What does that mean?"

"I said you're an ice queen! Don't you know that term? You're so behind the times for such a hotshot model! But I can see your icy heart melting now... You're reeeally concerned about Miku, I know it..."

"Wha...! That's not it at all! Why would you call me..."

"It's written aaall over your face. You're sooo worried about dear Miku's debut as the lead... And with a packed audience staring at her, you *know* she'll be nervous, the poor thing... Ah, she's doing that thing again, reaching for her handkerchief because she's nervous... But that's only going to make her more tense right now... Oh, I know! Didn't want to give it to her so soon, but she can have

this handkerchief...”

“Rin! I won’t let you say another word!”

“Ahh! Luka, your face is all red! I must be right on the mark! Awww!”

“*Riiiiin!*”

“Waaaaah! Luka’s maaaaaad!”

“Stop! Get back here!”

Rin starting to tease Luka led straight into getting her angry. I was worried whether it was wise to let this happen right before the show, but Kaito, Meiko, and Len went on chatting without any visible concern.

I was surprised Luka’s sharp eyes even picked up on my habit of reaching for my handkerchief to calm down, and admired that fact. But more importantly - if what Rin said was true, then I was, well... really happy, honestly. Did Luka really care that much about me? That thought made me much happier than her handkerchief. Though I also felt a bit guilty about Rin and Luka getting into a fight as a result...

“Um, is it okay for those two to be fighting right now? It’s almost showtime...”

“Oh, it’s fine. This happens all the time. Whatever it might look like, those two are the closest in our company, and for her behavior, Rin really is a smart girl. She’s usually able to use her horseplay to dissolve the tension between herself and Luka... and between us, while I’m at it.”

Kaito's eyes followed the two running around the green room as he spoke.

"M-Miss Rin thinks it through that much...? Wow..."

"It's a mystery if she really does that or not, but it's certainly true that everyone's nervous. For instance, that magazine she was reading was from ages ago. It's like a ritual for her to read it before important shows. We try to keep it hidden, but... we're all feeling a little frantic. So it's not just you, Miku. This is a very important show for us too, one that we've put a lot into."

"Miss Meiko..."

Just then, the door slammed open yet again. That door was going to break with all the beatings it was taking today. Of course, I hadn't helped with that either.

"Sooooorryyyyy! I tootally slept in! I can't believe it was past noon when I got up! Suuuuper sorry, everybody!"

Meg appeared from behind the door. While it was an apology on the surface, she said it with such cheer and a smile as to indicate she didn't think she'd done anything particularly bad.

"Meg... Did I not tell you harshly enough yesterday?! "Don't dare be late tomorrow!" What time do you think it is now?!"

"Now, now, Meiko. Let's just settle for her being on time... barely."

Meg, there is still a bit of time to go, so perhaps you should get some reciting in?”

“Right! Hm, I guess there are a few parts I wanted to check before the show...”

“Whew. So we made it all right...”

No sooner had Meg come in and started unpacking her bag did Gack poke his head in from behind, looking very tired.

“...Huh? Mr. Gack!”

“Good morning!”

“Wait, Gack... Could it be that the reason you weren’t here was...?”

“...I went to pick up Miss Meg, yes. I felt sure she was still sleeping away at home. And sure enough, so she was.”

“Snoozing away in a dream, I was! Thank you, Mr. Gack!”

“Don’t mention it. Your magnificently joyous face in sleep was very relieving to see. Neurosis has been widespread as of late, so it’s a wonderful thing to be able to sleep so soundly. Still, while sleep is important, it can cause great trouble for us all, so... you must learn to moderate, Miss Meg. This is the first day of a highly-anticipated performance, after all...”

“S-Sorryyy...”

Gack’s chiding made Meg look less than cheery for the first time since coming in the door. The part about “causing great trouble for us all” seemed effective. She had some definite eccentricities and no reservations about them, but when she made a clumsy move like

this, Gack would always rebuke her.

The total opposite of Meg, Gack was a serious and gentle soul full of common sense. Normally he wouldn't speak much, often just watching over others' actions with a charming look no matter what happened. But when Meg's absurd out-of-line actions caused trouble for the company, he would take the role of gently putting her in line. He must have anticipated that this time, hence taking the initiative to pick her up.

Meg was a member of the main cast, but also a playwright, so she was swamped with work daily. In addition, Gack was a farmer who managed his own independent farm. These two members who found it harder than the others to dedicate their time seemed to often be covering for one another. When Gack didn't show up for rehearsals, Meg would ask what sort of practice was being done and convey the message to Gack. But even so, anticipating that the other would be late and going to pick them up was simply impressive.

"If Mr. Gack hadn't come, I might still have been dreaming right now. Last night, I was working on some new material when I had an amazing flash of inspiration, so I stayed up all night... I guess until it got light out, actually!"

"No wonder you wouldn't answer the doorbell, then. It's a good thing I had that emergency key. Breaking in through the window would have looked a bit suspicious."

"That's why I sleep with the window open, just in case! It's not *that* unsafe, and I thought it would be bad if you came to wake me up

and forgot the key...”

“Thank you for your concern. But as a gentleman, I try to avoid intruding through windows when possible.”

Kaito’s face twitched slightly watching the odd conversation and interrupted.

“...Somebody play the straight man for these two... Nobody? Meg, you told me your clock was broken the other day. Did you fix that?”

“Oh! Come to think of it, I...”

“...Were you late because you don’t have a clock?”

“Err... um.”

“Miss Meg. Take this.”

Gack took the wristwatch off his left hand and handed it to Meg.

“Huh?! Can I really? This looks so expensive...”

“Not having a clock seems like it would be inconvenient. I have others, so don’t worry yourself.”

“Yaaay! Thanks so much! It’s super cool! This is a real antique, huh?”

“Yes, it was made about five years ago now...”

“...Make sure you get your home clock fixed too, Meg...”

Kaito quietly sighed, but Meg and Gack didn’t seem to hear, absorbed in conversation about the antique watch.

“Hey, Rin, Luka! Will you stop fighting already? Gack brought Meg along!”

Still in the middle of a fight at the back of the room, they both turned to Meiko simultaneously.

“Sigh... Meg’s predisposition to trouble always wears me out. I’m thirsty.”

“Oh, Len! Well then, shall I pour you some of my special milk tea?”

“...Sure. But are you prepared for the show yet?”

“Ahem! I actually got here a little bit ago, so I already changed and did my makeup down below. As you can see, I’m in perfect shape!”

“I see...”, Len mumbled with exhaustion, dodging Meg’s wink.

“Oh, right! These are for Miss Luka. Super-spicy cookies for our spice-lover! I have no doubt you’ll be very satisfied! They’re reeeeeally spicy.”

“My... How thoughtful. Thank you, dear.”

“Yikes... The packaging alone’s making my face red! Those look way too spicy!”

“And that’s just how I like it! Such a childish palate as ever, Rin.”

Clinging to Luka’s arm as she happily accepted Meg’s gift, Rin stared at the bright red package of cookies. The two had made up so quickly, it was impossible to imagine they’d just been wrestling with each other. But that package... it stung my mouth the more I looked at it.

“The cast’s finally together. All right...”

“Showtime’s approaching, everyone! Take your places!”

Just as Kaito called everyone together, a liaison entered through the door. Our expressions turned serious, and the once-bustling green room was enveloped by silence like a encampment setting out for the front line. One by one, with faces as stiff as soldiers, we left the green room and went down the short steps to the stage wings.

“It’s been a long road.”

“It’s finally beginning... I’m getting a little... scared. Hey, are you sure...”

“Meiko!”

Meiko shook momentarily at Kaito calling her name. Her eyes wavered, with a color like she was brooding something over.

“...It’s all right. I’m sure it’ll go just fine.”

“Kaito...”

“It truly has been an eventful road...”

Perhaps set off by Meiko’s unease, even Luka’s face seemed a little grim. The main event that so much practice had led up to was approaching moment by moment. Even for veteran Meiko and never-cowardly Luka, this was a scary time.

“Yes... We’ve managed to make it this far. But it’s what’s coming that’s important. The fate of the company is riding on this play. We’ll succeed with it, and bring back the glory of the Burlet Company. So everyone, please...”

A heavy silence. Kaito stopped talking and closed his eyes to think

of something. The settings for the first scene - the living room on the right wing of the stage, and the entrance hall on the left - had already been perfectly assembled. Scene shifters were making final checks for the set.

“...I know, Kaito. That’s been my dream too. I vowed to get here no matter what.”

“You mean *we*, right, Len? All of us feel the same way, Kaito! All of us actors here now... well, and the ones who didn’t get cast, and the ones behind the scenes making the props and sets, and the producer, and the ticket sellers - we’re all praying for the play to succeed, and for the honorable Burlet Company to make its comeback. For that, I...”

“Enough foolishness, Rin. At times like these, you should just pipe down and nod. Any unnecessary comments will just shake our resolve.”

Resolve - as Kaito said, I could just *feel* Luka, Rin, and Len’s extraordinary determination toward seeing the company succeed again. It was time to make it come true; this was a dream they’d had for many years. As much as they tended to fight and quarrel, suggesting they had their own individual wills, they were in fact connected by strong bonds in their hearts... myself not so much included.

Meiko took notice of how she’d made everyone uneasy, and while still feeling it herself, inserted an apology.

“I’m sorry for making you all anxious. ...A single person can’t make a play. Each person is there for the play, and the play is there for them. That’s something he once said - that he left behind for his company. We’ve made it here through years of treasuring our bonds. If we take this as we always do, no doubt it’ll go fine...”

“Um, guys, I think you might be forgetting something, so I’ll say it just to be sure... The most important “person” for us is the audience! Your first priority should be pleasing each and every person out there with your performance, okay? As much effort as we put in, if it doesn’t make the audience happy, then it won’t make for the revival of our troupe, or anything really. I mean, that’s why we’ve put in so much preparation...”

“Magnificent, Miss Meg. I was thinking that myself. I agree, a good reception from the audience should be regarded as equally important to demonstrating our tight teamwork.”

“She has a point. Naturally, a playwright would know what to say at a time like this.”

Pleasing each and every person in the audience - I nodded as I digested Meg’s advice. If my teamwork with everyone could move the audience for just an irreplaceable moment...

“The set is ready, everyone. Take your places, it’s almost time!”

The liaison called to us. The backstage workers were all set.

“Let’s all write a new page in the history of this company... no, of

West End. Are you ready?"

The buzzer rang, and the thick curtain rose.

Chapter 2: Curtain Rise

A powerful wind could be heard past the two windows on the back wall of the stage. Outside one of them which was left open, branches of a large tree swayed greatly in the storm. Above hovered a large, painted full moon. On the far right side of the stage was a fireplace, a small glass table in front of it, three armchairs around that, and two three-seater sofas.

A giant crystal chandelier hung from the center of the semi-cylindrical ceiling, but less than half of its many candles were lit. The light from two candlesticks beside the fireplace and a small standing lamp on a table under a large window just barely lit the room. The gloomy living room was enshrouded in a decadent, melancholy air unique to twilight.

The room was filled with expensive Adam-style furniture, but it was all ancient and weathered. The master of the mansion sat in the most luxurious armchair, wrinkled his brow, and looked up from his newspaper toward the window behind him.

“Tonight’s full moon is more beautiful than ever... I feel as if the moon goddess herself could visit on this night.”

“My, it’s gotten so dark already. We should prepare for dinner.”

The master’s wife sat in the opposite armchair, sipping tea. Standing up, she went to the windowsill behind him, and with a vague glance into the deep woods beyond that may or may not have been looking anywhere in particular, gently closed the

window.

“The wind is wet... The kingfishers were making such a clamor all day. It was just like this the last time we had a storm, too; they were chirping like mad...”

The stagehand Mayu stooped down behind the papier mache window and slowly swung a large fan to create artificial wind, shaking the curtains. Seeing them billow, the mistress headed over to the other windowsill and shut it tight.

The maid appeared from a door on stage right holding a tray, proceeded to the table in front of her, and refilled the empty teacups one by one.

“The weather was so nice until just a moment ago. Not to mention, I polished these windows until they sparkled today! What a shame they’ve been dirtied again!”

She spoke in a very cheery tone, very much in contrast to her “what a shame” line.

“Close all the windows around the mansion, and be sure to lock up. There could be a storm tonight.”

“Understood, master!”

The moment the master spoke the word “storm,” two dolls neatly positioned on one of the sofas moved as if just waking up from a deep sleep.

Rin and Len, who played the parts of the dolls, were both around 5 foot 3 inches, with blonde hair, blue eyes, and well-formed facial features that really could be described as doll-like. But even so, they were too big to be life-size dolls. As such, the entire set employed a trick of perspective; the further back an actor was, the smaller they appeared to be. Rin and Len were always positioned toward the back, so from the audience, they appeared to be smaller than usual.

“YahaHAHA! A storm? It’s been SO long!”

“It HAS... AHAhaHA!”

“Ah, so you’ve woken up.”

“Good day, maDAM!”

“GOOD day, MAdam! Will there REALLY be a STORM? For SURE?”

“Why, we won’t know until it comes. No one ever knows what will happen next, you know?”

“Oh, but it’s so boring. Father, if you’re done with the paper, could you lend it to me?”

“Very well.”

The Lady, the daughter of the family, relaxing by herself in the three-seat sofa opposite the dolls, reached over to the table for the newspaper the master tossed there. She began to read it with a look of boredom. But not long after, she spoke up with interest piqued.

“My, what’s this! A murder incident...? So things are getting dangerous even here. Nemo Village, why, that’s just through the

forest, isn't it? A tranquil village like that... could it be true? Let's see, the murderer killed eight people with a knife... Er, hm, how do I read this? What a strangely-written name... It says the killer escaped with the murder weapon, and is still on the run. How frightful!"

"It's only natural that there are dangerous occurrences where people gather. Another mundane day."

"But, father... I wonder why this is? I would normally pay the deaths of people I never knew no heed. Yet why does the simple fact of knowing that it happened in a village that by chance I knew of... indeed, a very nearby one, instill in me such fear...? No... such *excitement*."

Truly bewitching - Luka tossed the newspaper to the floor, and with a faint smile on her lips, lowered her eyebrows and spoke as if confessing her love to someone sitting right beside her. Even up on stage, the attentive audience could be heard letting out a sigh at her tremendous charm. For a moment, their gaze was inseparable from her.

"Will a STORM come to the FORest, TOO?"

The doll girl sitting on the sofa opposite the lady hopped in place - retaining her sitting position - as excited as a child finding a toy. The butler spoke while polishing a knight sculpture on the mantelpiece.

"Not a storm, but an incident, perhaps? Indeed, the moon tonight is eerily red, and shines mysteriously. I sense *something* will happen.

Something not good...”

“Now this is momentous!”

The troublesome maid made a declaration, always wont to make the slightest things out to be major incidents. With three empty teacups on her tray, she approached the butler, and her voice filling with anticipation and excitement, went on in an increasingly dramatic tone.

“In a forest eerily lit by the full moon... The birds squawk in fear of something, and the people fear the signs of a storm. In a nearby rural village, an unheard-of case of serial murders! Is this all just coincidence? ...No, something dreadful is brewing. Is it the decadent wish of the twilight? Do the threads of fate reach even to this bored mansion, desiring something *strange* to happen? A wandering vampire in search of blood... A werewolf transforming under this full moon and baring his fangs... A Frankenstein’s monster, soundlessly crawling up from the grave... Yes, when incidents occur, there is always...”

“An uninvited guest.”

Knock, knock, knock.

As soon as the butler spoke, the sound of a door knocker echoed from the front door, through the plain entrance hall that was on stage left. The audience could see past the doors, and thus could just barely see someone’s hand on the knocker. The seven on stage instantly turned toward the door with a start.

“Was that the wind...?”

The butler left the living room to head toward the entrance. The wind being made behind the window by the stagehand Mayu continued to blow fiercely, without end.

Knock, knock, knock. The rapping on the door echoed louder than before.

“Who could it be, so late at night...?”

The butler slowly approached, and opened the door with a cautious motion.

The door opened with a long creak. The entire mansion set was fully equipped with antique yet high-quality fixtures and furniture. But the front double doors in particular were so rotten and rusted, they seemed ready to fall off their hinges. They had, in fact, been made out of rotten wood by the setmakers. Stepping out through the doorway from the wing of the stage, entering the mansion on this ominous night, was a mysterious visitor.

“Good evening... I’m sorry to bother you at such a late hour.”

Just then, a clap of thunder roared from the ceiling above the audience, loud enough to shake the tops of their heads. For a

moment, the minimal stage lights went out, and a flash of lightning could be seen through the windows. The perfect sync of the lighting and acoustics added a ghastly fear and sense of presence to the enigmatic visitor's entrance scene. The audience held their breath, waiting on the visitor's next word.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. Behind my eyelids, I imagined another me. She was walking alone through the deep, dark woods... suddenly, she came to a stop at an antiquated mansion. / had become lost in this forest by sheer chance on this night threatening to rain - a simple villager. ...Ah, so cold. The rain began to drizzle down... I opened my eyes.

"Um... If, if it's all right, would I be allowed to stay here for the night? It seems I got lost walking in the woods..."

"...That's quite unfortunate."

The butler swiftly turned his head to the still-open door between the entrance hall and the living room, glancing at his master. What shall I do?, he was asking.

The master closed his eyes and thought. Opening them back up, he nodded ever so slightly.

"Indeed, it must be dangerous to be alone so late at night, mustn't it? Please, come inside."

"Thank you."

The villager came inside the mansion, and with another loud creak,

closed the busted door. Proceeding through the entrance hall, the two walked into the living room where the others resided.

The lights faded.

“It was cold outside, wasn’t it? Let me serve you some tea! It’ll warm you up!”

The maid put milk tea on the beautiful little table in front of the crackling fireplace. Thanking her, the villager nervously reached for the teacup, and slowly drank it down. A rich aroma like flowers and the mild sweetness of the tea passed through her nose, and after one sip, she sighed with bliss.

“Delicious...”, the villager remarked with eyes closed. Lost in the forest, unable to get home, the girl had finally found a place to stay the night - her relief was evident as the word rang through the room.

“Our maid’s tea is truly superb. It just calms your heart, doesn’t it?”
“By the way, we haven’t heard your name yet, young lady.”

The villager’s eyes flew open in reaction to the master’s words.

“...Do I need to tell it to you?”

She wrinkled her brow, and looked ready to cry at any moment, as

if thinking back on a tragically sorrowful past. Seeing this, the master was silent, and stared at her suspiciously. As the silence persisted, the others present quietly watched the interaction between the two.

“...All right. I didn’t mean to make you so sorrowful - I wouldn’t force you to say. But I was just... wondering what I should call you, you see.”

“...”

The villager kept quiet, still sorrowful. This time the doll twins, moving in their unnatural way, came up to the villager and stood before her.

“Hey, LISten, I had a GREAT ideA!”, the doll girl spoke, spreading out her arms.

“OOH! What? WHAT’s your IDEa?”, the doll boy interjected with good timing.

“D-D-Dolls...?!”

“WelCOME!”

“To our WONdrous manSION!”

The villager’s mouth hung open in shock as she stared at the moving dolls.

“That’s RIGHT! Nice TO meet you!”

“You... talk...?”

“Of COURSE, OF course! We’re dolls, BUT we’re aLIVE and KICKing!

AhaHAHA!”

“YES, yes! In this MANsion, even DOLLS are free TO talk if they WANT to TALK! YahaHAHA!”

The dolls moved and spoke. Seeing this wholly unnatural sight, the villager’s face filled with fear, and she shuddered. The master explained without hesitation.

“These doll twins were passed down to me along with this mansion by my grandfather. Do you know the legend about the witch who used to live in these woods? It’s said that these children were her creations. The land here has been the property of my family for generations. When my great-grandfather passed the title down to my grandfather, he received this mansion to use as a villa. These dolls have been around ever since then... I too was greatly surprised at first, but they’re not bad children. They love to play pranks, but they’re kind and honest souls. But indeed, it’s difficult to curtail your surprise, I’m sure. Please, don’t be so afraid.”

“...Sorry. I’ve never seen anything like this before... Um... I’m sorry.”

The villager apologized, still staring at the dolls.

“We’ll FORgive you! BeCAUSE, dolls are MADE to be NICE to huMANS!”

“Even THOUGH we’re dolls, we MOVE, and TALK, and eVEN eat. Oh, BUT we don’t GO to the bathROOM! Why IS that? BEcause... We’re dolls! AHAHAha!”

Still overwhelmed by the eeriness of the moving and talking dolls, the villager just kept listening in hopes of better understanding their existence.

“But FORget that! What WAS your iDEA?”

“If this girl WON’T tell us HER name, WE don’t have TO either!”

“AHA, I see! You CAN be friendLY without KNOWing someONE’s name! Just like US!”

The doll boy stared at the villager appraisingly, like a customer trying to decide which item to buy from a store counter.

“People WHO don’t know EACH other’s names CAN get aLONG just FINE! I read a BOOK just THE other day, that said PARTies are more FUN when you don’t know ANYone’s name!”

“Parties?”

“Yes! Parties where NO one knows WHO anyone IS but themSELVES!”

“Do you mean... a masquerade?”, the butler asked, putting his left hand to his chin.

“Ding DING! Correct!”

“Hmm. Why, that sounds like fun.”

The lady smiled and glanced toward the villager. The maid went around refilling everyone’s cups and spoke excitedly.

“It won’t be quite like a true masquerade, but in the sense of us and her not making any inquiries of each other and just celebrating all

night... That does seem like more fun than a normal party! And perhaps something might happen..."

"A party in which she is the star...? No one even knows her name, and she knows nothing of us. That does seem rather interesting."

"Yes, very interesting. And I assume we'll be able to drink?"

"I'm in favor of that!"

"HooRAY! We can DRINK wine!"

"Yaaay! YahaHAHA!"

The master seemed fond of the maid's suggestion, and the mistress and lady aired their approval. Even the doll twins seemed eager to participate in the party.

"Um? Are you really throwing a party just for me...?"

"It's no bother. It isn't just for you, but for us as well. After all... we were very *bored*."

"Bored...?"

"We've been waiting for an occurrence to dispel our boredom - or someone to make such a thing happen..."

"We'll gladly welcome anyone who can put off the boredom in our lives. Whether it's a blood-sucking vampire, a werewolf transformed by the full moon, a Frankenstein's monster rising from the grave... or an nameless, uninvited guest privy to special information."

"An uninvited guest..." The villager lowered her head, confusedly looking away from the master.

“Say, why were you walking through those woods this late at night?”, the lady inquired with a look of curiosity. “Even for a local, surely it’s dangerous to be out there alone?”

The villager reached for her left skirt pocket - to put her hand over a white envelope half sticking out. Slowly turning her head to look at every one of the seven, she finally told them only this: “I got lost on the way home.” The lady seemed dissatisfied with the answer, cutting off the conversation with a “hmpf.”

“By the way, where did you come from? You can tell us that much, can’t you?”

“Um... from Nemo Village, just east through the forest.”

As the villager spoke the name of her village, the mansion residents stared at her with bewilderment.

“I see... In that case, we’ll call you the Villager. Is that all right?”

“...Yes! I don’t mind.”

“And you may call us whatever you see fit. I believe it should be somewhat apparent from our appearances what our relations are.”

“Say... You said you came from Nemo Village... Are you...”

“Hm...?”

The villager stared back at the lady as she started to ask something.

“...No, it’s nothing.”

She quickly stood up out of her chair and exited the living room.

“You know, um, this really is... a strange mansion, isn't it? When I saw it from outside, I didn't see any lights on, so I thought no one even lived here. The front door was dilapidated, too... Yet it's so marvelous on the inside.”

“You're ONE to TALK, aren't you?”

“InDEED, INdeed! It's VErY strange to have a PARty with someONE we know NOthing about!”

“People only gather in this living room during the day, so there isn't much light here. Once night falls, we all leisurely eat dinner in the dining room next door. It's much brighter there. Now, let me prepare the wine.”

The butler then exchanged a few words with his master and left out the door to the entrance hall.

“What a strange night it's become, hm?”

“Huh...?”

“We were talking about it just before you arrived. The full moon, the signs of a storm, and a grave incident at a nearby village. We thought something *strange* might happen here at this mansion, as well.”

The maid held her hands to her chest, her eyes in a trance.

“I...”

“Oh, you're always like this, trying to make an incident out of

everything. Don't worry our guest with such omens. What will you do if something really *does* happen...?"

The mistress gently rebuked the excited maid. But even in her mild and gentle voice, there was an unconcealable hint of anticipation.

"Come, now, don't make a ruckus. Go help the maid; it's quite an endeavor to close all the windows in a mansion this large. Once you're done, make preparations for dinner."

The master promptly began issuing orders to everyone.

"Oh, please let me help as well. If you just want all the windows closed, then the more people the better, right? It's already started to rain... We should hurry."

Everyone present turned to the windows. It had indeed begun to rain outside. The drizzling echoed, and the tops of the tree branches were wet.

"Then go assist the maid. Start with the windows in the south hallway of the first floor."

Lights fade. Set change: Hall, living room, dining room, and stairs.

With a toast, a calm yet bustling air filled the dining room. Crowded

around the large, oblong table with their food, everyone sipped their wine glasses. Some had cheerful conversations, some started to sing, some stood from their seats and danced, creating an ever-changing ruckus.

The villager couldn't hide her bewilderment seeing these people enjoying themselves so, a complete turnaround from how they'd behaved in the living room; she stared at them blankly.

The doll girl soon took notice of this and jauntily came over to her. With her restrictive doll movements, she put her all into moving her little body for a short dance. At the end, she straightened out her dress and bent into a cute little bow, which earned the villager's applause. Glad to see this, the girl took the villager's hand and brought her into the circle, urging her to enjoy the party with the others.

The mistress was boasting about her unparalleled love of beer - already drinking straight from the bottle, not bothering with a glass - and started a drinking competition with the lady. The master sat politely in his seat a short distance away, and looked on at them with a sigh.

As the maid cleaned up empty plates, she was stuffing her own cheeks, already enjoying the party to the fullest. The butler going around pouring everyone wine soon became entangled with the other residents, and his extremely serious face seemed worried about not fulfilling his duty.

Soon, the doll boy began playing a lute to which the doll girl danced. Everyone seemed to know the song, as the mistress and lady joined in right after finishing up their competition. The song's tempo gradually increased, and the three singers started dancing to its rhythm. The master who had only been tapping his feet until then stood up, took the hands of the mistress and lady, and joined the dance.

The doll girl beckoned to the others, inviting them into the hall, and everyone proceeded there still singing and dancing. She headed for the piano in the hall and began providing a dynamic accompaniment unimaginable for her small doll body. The doll boy came up beside her, gave a wink, and this time played the backbeat rhythm on the lute.

All the while, there wasn't the slightest break in the song or dance, the tempo kept increasing, and the intensity climbed higher. Even the butler and maid abandoned their jobs to join the dance. Everyone looked toward the villager, who watched the wonderful spontaneous performance without a word. For a moment, the seven's movements came to a halt. And then...

The villager who remained in the corner of the dining room smiled bright, like an adventurer invited to an unexplored paradise, and proceeded toward their center. The bouncy shuffle played on the piano and lute re-established its tempo, and the mansion dwellers began their dance again, beckoning the girl approaching the center of the living room.

Dancing out into the middle of the stage, the lead role played her part in the highlight of this wondrous, boisterous party. The audience was entranced by the lines coming one after another between gaps in the song; they were given no time to even breathe.

I've never experienced such a marvelous, joyous, dreamlike celebration before...

The feelings of the villager and of Miku were in perfect sync. Like a puppet pulled about by divine strings, she moved nimbly, and raw joy poured out from her. The uninvited guest had, just like that, melted among the mansion's inhabitants, forgot the passing of time, and was swallowed up by the bustling party. At the climax of the song, everyone took a final pose and halted.

"Oh, what a magnificent night! If only this moment could last forever..."

It was the turning point of the play - the lead role's crucial line that introduced the theme. But Miku, so absorbed in "being the villager" as to forget her position as an actress, was driven by the exaltation of the moment to speak her line a moment too early. As a result, she came to a stop just a step before where she should have been standing, and her wide-opened left hand forcefully smacked into something.

With a loud sound of metal hitting metal, the hands of the clock placed in the middle of the room slipped off, bounced off the hard

wooden floor, and spinning around two or three times, came to the front of the stage and stopped.

It felt as if the scene was, in that moment, cut away from reality and stopped in time. A bizarre silence. The villager, her eyes and mouth open wide, her face a mixture of ecstasy and madness, couldn't move a muscle. Because this was not in the script. It was pure accident. This situation of the clock being broken with a loud sound was non-existent in the act's finale.

...Now I've done it.

My brain went blank. I'd broken the clock prop, taken off its hands. How in the world could we reach the conclusion of the act now...? My mind desperately tried to think, but my body was rejecting any movement. Most likely, I was busy doing everything in my power to keep myself from shaking with fear. In the hushed silence, a second of real time felt like it could have been a minute, or an hour.

"AhhHH... YOU broke the CLOCK..."

Len sent me a lifeboat. With quick judgement, he came up with an adlib that the clownish doll boy might say.

"Oh NO, OH no! Time has COME to a STOP! You said IT! *If ONLY this*

MOMENT could last FOREVER! The clock MUST have HEARD your wish! YahaHAHA...!”

Rin continued on, quickly and brilliantly tying together the broken clock with the villager’s line of “this moment lasting forever.”

Speedily letting the audience know the situation in the play, and doing so with the living dolls, who were in a way the creepiest characters, the course was immediately changed from wrapping up the wonderfully lively party, instead returning to the eerie night from the start of the act. Seeing this bizarre, instantaneous shift in scene, the audience would no doubt be filled with anticipation, dying to know what would happen in the second act. These two really were prodigies.

The others picked up the twins’ lead and came up with their own adlibs, ending with the master naturally tying it into the end of the first act. I gave a mental sigh of relief as I watched their performances in silence.

After the master’s final miraculous follow-up, the stagehand Mayu determined that his line signified the end of the act and began to lower the curtain. This was my cue as the lead role to finish up act one.

While everyone exited via the stairs to the second floor on stage right, I let the letter hidden in my skirt pocket flutter out onto the center of the stage. But the mansion denizens didn’t notice it, continuing up the stairs and off the stage. All that was left in the

hall was the broken clock and the letter dropped by the villager. With this unexpected cliffhanger for the second act, the curtain swiftly dropped.

Moments after that piece of cloth put the mysterious world of night to rest, unbroken applause and excitement rang out for the wonderful fictitious world behind the curtain, and the people who dwelled there.

Chapter 3: Intermission Night

Now I've done it... I may just have ruined the whole play...

Applause continued to roar, and the moment I went up into the wings of the stage, the actors approached with frightening looks. I hung my head wordlessly, unable to look them in the eye. That mistake had without a doubt ruined the script, ruined a Burlet play. I'd metaphorically torn up a script written by the playwright everyone here worshipped, broken a prop, and forced everyone to adlib.

It was said that, while Burlet was alive, he would not forgive any mistake in acting out the most minor details written in the script - not a single blink, sigh, or footstep could be off. The perfect set was to have the perfect players, and their combination would create an overwhelmingly realistic world for the play. Such a carefully-calculated world would crumble from the slightest error. What the Villager had done - it was sacrilege against him. A bead of cold sweat ran down my spine.

"...I'm sorry!! I-I... I made an unforgivable mistake...!"

Kaito retained his sharp expression and firmly grabbed my shoulders.

"Are you hurt?!"

"...Huh...?"

"You swung your hand into the clock, yes? Show me... That must

have hurt.”

“My, it made such a loud noise, too. I felt my heart stop...”

I held my trembling left hand out, and Kaito and Luka carefully examined it. It was a little sore, but there was nothing in the way of an injury.

“Thank goodness... We were worried.”

Everyone sighed with relief, losing the sharp gazes they’d had before. I was certain they’d be angry. Bewildered by their response, my vision wavered as I wondered how to respond. No one seemed to care a lick that I’d broken the clock. Their scary looks as they approached gave me a very different idea, but they were just worried about me being hurt... My heart, crushed with fear about having failed and what I should do to make up for it, was slowly warmed.

“...Um... But more importantly than me, the clock might be broken...”

“The prop crew went running toward the stage a second ago. I bet it’ll be fixed by tomorrow,” Len told me, still looking at the stage.

Sure enough, there were two staff members there checking the clock prop all over. Seeing that brought back my urge to get out of here immediately.

“But I... I messed up the script. I... profaned his play...”

“Profaned...? Why?”

“...Because his scripts, they have to be performed perfectly. Not even one mistake can be allowed, or they aren’t complete... And that’s why you all were so serious, and put in so much practice. Of course I knew that... but I...”

The actors’ faces clouded, and they looked off into empty space. No one would make eye contact with anyone else. There was a long awkward silence, and even the backstage staff hadn’t come to speak to us, because they were busy pretending not to be watching.

“Miku... You’re right that the finale of the act didn’t go according to script. But I don’t think that accident you brought about was a bad thing. No, to be honest... That moment gave me goosebumps.”

Kaito lowered his eyebrows and spoke with a smile. His face seemed to say “you got me good.”

“Huh?”

“Actually, I feel the same. In all my years in this troupe, nothing’s given me such a thrill before. An unintended accident, bringing such exhilaration as to make the scene unforgettable... I saw your face then, and I wanted to provide help, but I couldn’t move. Just as you said “If only this moment could last forever”... you truly did stop the clock. It came out a little rough, granted, but...”

“I hate to admit it, but I simply have to respect you for making a miracle like that happen. Even if you *are* just a clumsy oaf most of the time, you made it into something of an art! It puts all of my

roles to shame.”

Kaito, Meiko, and even Luka were, for some reason, praising my accident. The dread of my mistake dominated my mind and body such that I didn’t even feel any pain in the hand that struck the clock, so I had no opportunity to see what everyone’s reactions had been. Luka was right that it really was just another one of my clumsy blunders.

“Yeah, we sure were all frozen up! Me included! I was thinking like, the most startling moments are the ones where you don’t even scream! And I was on the other side of Miss Miku from the clock, so I really heard it loud. My heart pounded, and I was watching everyone wondering who would follow up that act!”

“Oh, Meg... Always taking it slow, aren’t you.”

“Really, the accident itself was fantastic enough, but... Len instantly filling in and Miss Rin cleaning up from there was just stupendous, and nothing less. I’ve seen many actors on my long road here, but it would be difficult for even an experienced veteran to act so quick-wittedly.”

Gack, who was typically silent and rarely if ever wore a smile-like smile, showed me a grin of heartfelt joy.

“Ehehehe! Wow, we got Gack’s praise!”

“...Thanks.”

Rin and Len gave their respective thanks to Gack. The others, too,

extolled their performance. Yes, if Rin and Len hadn't brought everything together, the play truly would have stopped, and who knows what would have happened next.

"Um... Miss Rin, Mr. Len! Thank you so much. I don't know how to thank you... All of you, I mean. I was so stunned, and I thought, if you hadn't stepped in..."

"Enough, Miku! We're all in this play together, okay? Of course we'll help each other out... we're friends! And no one's gonna shout or blame you for making a mistake. When someone makes a mistake, someone else just has to cover for it. Just trust us, okay? I know I'm believing in our lead actress, too!"

"Miss Rin..."

Happiness welled up in my heart hearing Rin say that she believed in me.

"Thank you. I... I'll learn from my mistake, and do my best in act two. Even though I messed up at the end... It was so much fun performing today. I thought I'd be so nervous, but I found myself dancing like I'd really become the Villager. I thought from the bottom of my heart, what a wonderful party... and I was honored to be standing on that stage. It's all thanks to this lost script being found, and the troupe holding that audition... It really feels like a miracle."

Unable to hold in my emotions, I let them all out. In doing so, I felt the mood change a little bit from the excitement over my accident;

everyone looked a little restless. Had I said something improper again?

“Y-Yes... You’re right. You really could call it a *miracle*, indeed.”

“Oh, yes.”

Kaito folded his arms, then slowly opened his mouth as if about to tell a fairy tale.

“Come to think of it, perhaps we never told you the story of how we came to discover Crazy ∞ nighT. Well, this is a good opportunity for that. ...One night, after finishing a show, we were drinking in green room #1 for our usual celebration. Then the prop-maker Ia came and told us she’d lost a prop for tomorrow’s show, and couldn’t find it anywhere in the theater.

“We, too, searched every nook and cranny. And just in case, we decided to also search the rarely-opened underground cellar, where no-longer-used props and setpieces were stored. In doing so, we found an old, rotten box in the back of the cellar. We casually opened the suspicious box, and...”

“Inside was a book... titled Crazy ∞ nighT.”

“Yes, Len was the one who found it. We were so surprised, and thought it couldn’t be true. After all... as far as anyone knows, the mansion Mr. Burlet lived in was burned down long ago, and no trace of it remained. As such, no detailed records of his life or anything else about him remain any longer. It’s also said that he

himself died in that fire, but no details on that remain either. If any of his belongings were found, they'd go for a premium on the same level as a national treasure...

"But here at the Burlet Company, the theater he created, a few of his belongings were found after his death. Including, now, by sheer coincidence, his lost posthumous work. It would appear that sometime before his mansion burned down, he visited the theater and left the script in the cellar."

"Perhaps upon his death, he wanted to leave a glimmer of hope for the people who carried on his will... That's what we felt when we found the script. And we noticed that this play, Crazy ∞ nighT, showed inspiration from his hometown of Zacry Village, his mansion, and the surrounding forest. So we traveled to that village many times, doing research to come if only slightly closer to understanding the play he'd pictured. It was a wonderfully tranquil place."

Meiko gently smiled, remembering that time nostalgically. Zacry Village... The village where Mr. Burlet lived, and my own birthplace as well. I was somewhat pleased to hear her complimenting it.

"Oh yes, we took many trips there. It was inconvenient to be sure, being so backwoods, but it was quite pretty."

"Yeah, it was very peaceful and livable. I'd like to live somewhere like that someday."

"Oh, Len... You just want to copy everything Mr. Burlet does, don't you! Like the other day, you made a wax seal you'll never use

because you said he had one! Gosh, you're such a Burlet nerd!"

Without exception, the members of the company aspired to Mr. Burlet's works and charisma, with such unimpeded passion as to be called fanatical. Len in particular, in contrast to his cool attitude and appearance, was said to likely be the one who adored Burlet the most. His sister had told me in secret that he had a dedicated collection room at home with countless Burlet-related items, strived to be better than anyone at acting out his works, and dreamed of someday becoming a playwright himself.

"...And that's a bad thing? Burlet was a man among men. Of course I'd model myself on him."

"A wax seal? That doesn't sound like something youths these days would use much, but I must say, it does seem rather refined of you."

"Geez, Gack! "Youths these days"? You sound like such an old man!"

"Er... Are any of you listening to my story?"

With all eight members of the cast together, it was hard to stick to a single conversation. Someone would throw in an aside like this, and things would quickly be derailed.

"Er, I'm listening, Mr. Kaito! I want to know what happened next. I'm very, um... curious about... what kind of memories you were making, before I joined the troupe."

The pasts of the actors who, until not too long ago, I viewed as

standing among the clouds. Not to mention, the whole story surrounding Crazy ∞ nighT. We'd all been so busy with practice, I felt I never had the opportunity to ask them about the path leading up to this production.

"Thanks, Miku. Let's get back to it... In order to put on the perfect enactment of Burlet's play, we kept going to that village that served as a model for research, working tirelessly on the details of the production. Then we started talking with our advertisers, and picked up some potent sponsors. When the papers wrote "Burlet's lost work found, the era of the legacy-carrying Burlet Company returns to West End"... we were certainly surprised. This led people all around the world to take interest in us.

"On one hand, the times are changing, and the rise of movies is crushing theater culture, rotting it away. But there are no small number of theater fans still on the lookout for superb classics. Yes, just like us. We've long wanted to show his marvelous works to the world, carry on his tradition, let the culture of Burlet survive unchanging to the next generation. In our time, a troupe like the Burlet Company is antiquated, some might say. But perhaps the glorious history of it is still compelling. We want the young people of today to have the chance to understand the quality of his works..."

The others soon became attentive to Kaito's fervent speech. Their faces were all serious.

"And even among the company... there were some swept up by the

changing of times, who sought reform in the Burlet Company. “Rebels” against us... as we called them. When the troupe began to suffer financial woes, the membership split into two - the rebels, and those like us who wanted to preserve the will of Burlet. It was about... a year and a half before you joined, I believe. Daily we would argue about the future of the troupe, sometimes even getting into fistfights over it.”

“Ah, those were the days... My fists really got going sometimes!”

Meiko spoke with an impassioned look, and Len and Gack in front of her briefly trembled. Though of a calm demeanor and an older-sister-like disposition, she was actually deathly scary when made mad. If someone picked a fight, she’d always give it to them, she boasted; she told me that before she became an actor, until her early teens, she hung out with men and got into fights constantly, a true delinquent. Numerous terrifying legends of her were still passed down among the delinquents in the area, it seemed.

“Mei-pie sure put in a lot of work during that time... All the men she dealt with came back one by one, suddenly converted to our side... Well, the point is, in a sense we won the battle to carry on Burlet’s legacy. We held our ground... and then finally, found a chance for a comeback. Which was, of course, this play. You could say the whole trip from falling into money woes a year and a half ago to today was a very dramatic story in itself. As if Burlet had a hand even in the script for those events...”

“Some do deign to say the phantom playwright had the hand of

God, yes... It wouldn't be too strange to think he did have intellect beyond mortals, would it?"

Even Meg, with a suspicious look, sounded her agreement to Kaito's speech.

"The passion in this company... All your devotion to Mr. Burlet made a miracle happen, I'm sure of it. How wonderful..."

Then Luka, who had been looking at the stage in a sort of trance, spoke.

"You know, I don't have much interest in theater itself... But his plays are a different story. When I perform in them, I find myself meeting another self in the play. It's an impossibly joyous feeling. My heart quivers, and I can do nothing but bubble up with passion for my other self."

"We've really been saved by the works our great predecessor left us. If we hadn't found this script back then, the company wouldn't have had a future. We have to keep going further with his plays, and protect the troupe. *Many things have been lost* to that end, but still, I..."

Kaito's eyes gazed off into the distance. Seeing his determined face, Meiko responded sympathetically.

"I understand what you mean to say, Kaito. Whatever the reason, it's truly painful to *lose friends*. But we all joined the troupe wanting

to perform Burlet plays, didn't we? We'll keep alive the works and the company left by the one we adore... And that is a truly happy thing. This play, too... it feels like a dream."

(Lose friends...?)

Meiko spoke sadly, seeming to reflect on the irreplaceable time she'd spent with everyone. The others, too, went from being excited to having pained faces, recalling both happiness and sadness, and quietly listened to her.

"Yes, it really seems like such a dream..."

With act one over, everyone in the company began doing their respective preparations for act two. I was by myself in the props room on the second floor, helping with the prop work. The task was neatly arranging pages of old newspapers to be used tomorrow. No page could be too large or too small. I had to picture the scene in which they were used in my head, and carefully assemble them for that purpose. Sitting in a work desk by the windowsill, I finished one and then glanced up out the window.

There'd been a full house today. Even the standing seats sold out, and after all tickets were sold, the streets outside were still flooded over with people who came after hearing about it from newspaper extras. It was 10 PM, long past the theater closed, but there were still crowds of fans waiting outside the green room entrance for the

actors to come out. Among them was a group with matching outfits... looking closer, I realized I'd found Rin and Luka's fans. I gazed at them absent-mindedly for a while, then one suddenly grabbed another by the collar and yelled something. A fight was starting - a scene I'd seen many times before.

"Are they going to be okay without umbrellas? I hope they don't catch cold..."

The rain that had started in the evening continued to fall with a light drizzling sound, forming some puddles on the street. Gack told me that the forecast for this weekend, and thus the three days of Crazy ∞ nighT's run, was nothing but rain. I suppose it was the knowledge and experience he'd picked up running a farm as a second job - Gack could sense weather patterns from wind direction and temperature, and he had yet to make an incorrect prediction. Even in this rain, there'd been a superb turnout, which seemed to indicate that act one was a huge success.

Ahh... ah.

While casually looking down at the rainy street, I saw one of Len's fans, a passionate frequenter of the theater, leave out the green room entrance. He boarded a limousine parked on the street, and the car sped off.

"Was that Mr. Len's sponsor...? He's always watching from the VIP seats... The gentleman who brings the roses Miss Luka says always look so cool... I wonder what color they were today...? I don't

suppose... they're lovers, are they...?"

All the actors in this play were main cast members, each with their own level of popularity, and many fans to their name. Rin and Len had the greatest number of passionate supporters, Luka had fans that showed up every time without fail, and even Miku who just entered the troupe had a significant number of people who knew her face.

"That's so nice... I wonder if I'll ever have fans like that, someday..."
"...Don't you already?"

I turned around in surprise and found Len at the now-open door. He was holding a huge blue bouquet improperly like a baseball bat, his left hand leaning it against his shoulder. A complete departure from during the play, his expression was as neutral as ever, but he seemed just a little displeased to me.

"...M-Mr. Len! When did you...?"

"...Eh."

"Um..."

"..."

Len and I had hardly ever spoken. Not only was I withdrawn, finding difficulty speaking to others, Len was on the shy side and only talked with those he was close to - and since Rin, Meiko, and Meg were always around him, there were very few chances for just the two of us to speak. An awkward silence. I tried to think up a topic, feeling obligated to continue the conversation. But I felt like we'd

said all there was to be said about the show earlier when the whole group was together, and nothing else appropriate came to mind.

I glanced toward Len, and as we made eye contact, I noticed he was sort of staring at me. His blue eyes bordered by long gold eyelashes, though technically the same color as Rin's, gave a different impression from Rin's cheery ones, carrying a serene and quiet glint instead. But I knew that during his performances, his eyes had an abnormally passionate look to them. Right now, they were back to his usual frigid blue, but I found both colors to be beautiful.

"...I don't want you getting the wrong idea, so just so you know..."

"Wrong idea?"

"They're just a sponsor, that's all."

I tilted my head, not immediately knowing who he meant by "they."

"...I mean the man who gave me these roses."

"Ah... C-Could you have, um... heard me...?"

"I didn't really mean to hear it. ...But I heard it."

"I-I'm sorry! That was rude of me..."

"...It's fine. Just as long as you understand that it's not anything like that..."

Maybe that was the reason he looked upset. Though Len never showed much interest in others, he was seemingly not so hard-hearted to this person who, while a sponsor, was still a fan. (With other people, he would display overt displeasure.) He would always smile at this enthusiastic support, so I foolishly misinterpreted that,

and my mind took it in a weird direction.

“This rain is... really something.”

I looked toward the bouquet in his hand and noticed it was a little wet, with drips falling off the petals.

“It is. Mr. Gack said it would rain all throughout the production...”

“Hmm... Then there’s no doubt about it. I bet you anything he’ll be busy checking his vineyard tomorrow.”

“Huh...? You think Mr. Gack will be late?”

“...There are lots of times when no one’s watching him... Did you not know that he often slips away to his nearby field when he has the chance?”

“N-No, I had no idea... Oh, actually, Mr. Kaito said today that he came really early, but he hadn’t seen him since. But wasn’t that because he went to pick up Miss Meg?”

“...Could’ve easily been both. He seems to be an expert at it, and he isn’t like Meg, making big blunders like being extremely late. He’s not the only one juggling jobs. Luka and Meg are often gone to do modeling or writing... Even we sometimes go do rounds to advertise. The point is, you can go around doing whatever you want. As long as, in the end, you can put forth your assets, your acting talent, then no one will complain.”

“I see... You all do a lot besides just practice. Which broadens your horizons, and that experience helps with your acting...”

“You’ve got it. Practice alone won’t make a play go perfect. You have to do a variety of things, go a variety of places, experience more. And someday, I...”

“...Huh?”

“...No, forget it.”

He seemed just a little sad, I thought. Silence fell again. Since we’d never spoken just the two of us before, it was tense for me. I had to come up with a topic.

“Um... Mr. Len, what do you do on your days off? Like, as a hobby, or...”

“...Billiards.”

“O-Ohh! That’s right, you do talk about that with Mr. Gack and Mr. Kaito! Oh, and wasn’t Miss Meiko supposed to be really good...?”

“...Yeah.”

Not good... The conversation wasn’t getting anywhere. I’d never played billiards myself, and while there was a billiards room at the theater, I’d never gone into it for anything but cleaning.

“...U-Uhhhhmmm, Mr. Len! Ah, what’s your favorite play by Mr. Burlet?”

“...”

We met eyes briefly, but he quickly turned away. I couldn’t read his still-neutral face, unchanging since he’d come into the room. The silence was so awkward, I’d abruptly forced myself to come up with another topic. I was shocked to my very core by my inability to take

a hint, and regretted my question as soon as I heard myself say it.

“...I think my favorite might be The Silence of the Snowy Night...”

“Oh! That’s actually my favorite, too...! It was my first Burlet play, which my grandma took me to see when I was little. I was so entranced by the realistic world in the story, I felt like I’d been left behind in the play... I was so moved by it, it got me wanting to become an actress!”

I had the same favorite play as this prodigy! That trivial coincidence made me happy, and while I knew my words were pretty jumbled, I went on talking anyway.

“Huh... So you like it too. It’s particularly dark and sad, even for Burlet, but it has a sense of wonder I never get tired of seeing. The story itself is great, but the details of the set are truly amazing. Just a single production of a Burlet play can use so many sets. Even the snow and the way it falls... from the powdery snow to the stormy snow, all the props are made specifically to match their scene. All those minor details compounding is what creates his dense worlds.”

Perhaps because of the fact that out of over a hundred Burlet plays, we had the same favorite, he became significantly more talkative than before.

“Is that right? I’ve only been here half a year, so... I’ve never seen The Silence of the Snowy Night performed by the current main cast...”

“...I haven’t played in it yet, either. I think someone said that it was

planned next after Crazy ∞ nighT...”

“Is it?! Wow... I can’t wait!”

I wondered, what would that masterpiece look like played by this cast? The part of the protagonist, the boy who loses the girl he loves... Could it be?

“It seems like there’s no one but... well, for now, no one but me for the lead part. After all, I can play the part, and I’m not too old for it.”

“I think you’d be perfect as the lead, Mr. Len! I’d love to see what kinds of performances the company’s current cast puts on. I really can’t wait...”

“...Well, it’s not all fun and games. That script calls for more acting skill than others, so I’m sure it’ll need a lot of practice. And I’ve no doubt you’ll be picked for the cast, too.”

“...Huh?”

“...”

I might be picked, too...? Again? For the next Burlet Company performance? I believed that I’d been picked as the lead actress for Crazy ∞ nighT on account of being an unknown newcomer from the same village as Mr. Burlet - to “make some news,” in a sense. Thus, I was completely prepared for, and resigned to, the possibility of being discharged after this show if I didn’t do well.

“That performance you put on today... It was pretty good.”

“...!”

I lifted my head, unable to hide my surprise at the sudden praise. “Pretty good,” the prodigy said - about *my* acting. My face flushed with joy.

“So there’s a pretty considerable chance you’ll be cast in the next play, too; not just a one-hit wonder. But...”

As he spoke, he stopped leaning on the doorway and stepped to face me, meeting me head-on. The pouring rain echoed through the room, and there were easily five meters between us, yet his quiet, monologue-like words were spoken clearly, so I could hear them easily. The art of speaking in a quiet tone, yet not being drowned out by surrounding noise, voice and mood both reaching all the way to the furthest seats... It was one I still hadn’t learned.

“If you want to aim higher, it’s no good to keep practicing this same way. You might come to a stop somewhere. So you should study the basics more.”

“Basics?”

“Yeah. Not so much the basics of acting, but helpful skills to go on top of acting. What do you think the most essential skill for an actor is?”

I puzzled over it for a bit, not immediately having an answer.

“Err... ex, expressiveness?”

“Nope.”

“Eh...? Ahh, um... e-experience?”

“Nope. I mean, that’s important. But the most important thing is

insight.”

“Insight...”

“A good play makes the audience even forget about their real selves, so they can get absorbed in the world in front of them. Making a good play takes set preparation, backstage help, and most importantly, the actors’ acting ability. But “acting ability” covers a lot of things. If you ask me what sort of ability it is... it’s being able to show something fake as if it were real.”

“Making the fake... real...?”

“To put it bluntly, it’s a trick. Us fooling the audience. We convince them that what they’re looking at is another real world. That’s what a play is. A totally fabricated sham. A world with props, sets, people, and surrounding events that are all downright lies. So, how much can you do to make it seem like it’s not? Can you show it as if it were the real world? That’s our job.”

“Yes... I see. But what do you mean by insight being most important?”

“You have to act like this sham is real, and fool the audience into thinking that. That *fooling* is where insight is key. Let’s say I do some action, and somebody... let’s say you’re watching. You’re going to feel some way about it, have some kind of reaction. Well, what if I could make predictions about how you’d react, and what if my prediction was almost never wrong? Then I could fool you as much as I wanted without you noticing anything amiss - I could freely manipulate your feelings.”

“...!”

“Say, if I tore apart this bouquet of roses, right here... Would you be scared?”

“Huh...?”

Len approached me slowly, a hint of madness in the back of his eyes. A few blue petals, thicker in color than even his eyes, fluttered off the roses. I stood up and almost reflexively backed away from him.

“What must I say... or do... to scare you? Go for the visual, and tear apart these roses...? Or maybe swiftly go to your pain receptors, forcefully punch you... But depending on the person, things done to instill fear might not instill fear, but rather anger or sadness... or even joy. Yes, surely even that’s a possibility... And all of those possibilities are in a big mix. But you want to know the exact result. How do you find out? What should you do, to find out what emotion they’ll feel?”

Len had gotten up right in front of me, staring right at my face. There was a faint smile on his lips, and his wide, unblinking eyes showed the cold-blooded cruelty of a predator about to leap on prey. I’m scared... Why did I feel scared of him? He’d been talking perfectly normally, but then this sudden transformation... he had completely changed in an instant. He held up the bouquet toward the ceiling, and quickly swung it down. I shut my eyes to brace for the coming impact.

“...”

“...Sigh.”

“...”

“I guess that was just too scary, huh?”

“...Huh?”

I timidly opened my eyes and saw only blue. It was the bouquet, right? My vision was too blurry to tell; I'd started crying.

“My bad. I went too far.”

“...”

“...Please don't cry. I'm sorry.”

“Sniff...”

He was definitely just teasing me. All he did was say he might tear apart the bouquet or punch me, and approach me with a scary look, and I completely fell for it. Alas, I really had been scared. For a moment, it was scary enough to make me cry. Such was his acting skill - I had been *completely fooled*. I let my tears and snot run for a while, and he anxiously handed me a handkerchief, so I loudly blew my nose on it. His straight face turned slightly more displeased.

“You're going to blow on it...? Well, fine.”

“P-Punishment for muh-making me cry...”

“...I said “my bad.””

“I know... the answer.”

“Huh?”

“By observing me... you could tell what to do to scare me. That's

why you were staring at me...”

“...That’s right. I’m happy that you finally get it,” Len replied, without a trace of happiness in his face.

Was he acting all cool to make it impossible to discern what he was thinking? Or was that his normal way of expressing emotions? I didn’t know yet. How could I know he was really thinking “I’m happy”?

“...I... never thought about all that at all... I just wanted to act in a play, and hoped people would like me as the Villager... that’s all I thought...”

“It’s also essential to immerse yourself in the world of the play, dedicating yourself to becoming your role. However, you have to read the mood from the audience and the other players, and adjust your acting accordingly. Otherwise the fabricated world begins to slip away. Like that moment today.”

“I got so wrapped up in my acting... I became the Villager and totally forgot about really being Miku, so I was blind to everything around me...”

“Well, it goes the other way; it’s not good to read the audience too much, and play right to their expectations. You have to keep betraying their expectations, in a good way. But you also have to balance it with their assurance that you’ll always come through in the end. An unstable performance that no one understands makes the audience uneasy, and then there’s no way they can enjoy the play. So keeping balance is the hardest part, in a way.”

“So just dedicating myself strictly to acting won’t do...”

“But that is important. The harder you’re trying, the more you get through to people. Nobody’s going to be displeased if they see you’re trying your best, right?”

“Yeah... That’s right.”

“And when it’s a klutz like you desperately giving her best effort, it’s going to look even better to people than it would for a regular actor.”

“...Sniff...”

“I guess I’ve said a lot. All I want to say is... Your honesty and the way you never doubt anybody is admirable, but if you want to climb higher in the world, that won’t be enough. You should learn about strategy, too - using your insight to fool the audience.”

“O-Okay...”

“Although, hm... you’d probably make a good audience member.”

“Eh?”

“Because you’re easy to fool. You should observe the feelings of the most easily-swayed people first. You can probably empathize with them.”

“...”

“Once you’ve got enough experience, maybe you can fool me someday, huh?”

“I-I’ll try... But fooling you seems like much too high a hurdle for me, Mr. Len...”

“...That “Mr. Len” thing is weirding me out.”

“Wha...?! It... is it...?”

“I’m the younger one... You don’t have to call me mister.”

“But...”

“...”

His silent response put a pressure on me, one that spoke to him not accepting a dissenting opinion.

“I understand... E-Er, I mean, got it. I’ll cuh, c-call you... Len. I mean, no! Can I... really call you...?”

“...It’s fine, Miku.”

A boy who, though younger than me, had a wealth of experience, genius intellect, and natural acting talent. I always shrunk before his mature and frigid aura, but I felt like he was a really good person. He was sparing his time to give inexperienced me advice, and showed a desire to get me feeling comfortable with talking to him without scruples. If only slightly, I was being recognized by the other members of the troupe as a true friend.

“Um... Thank you. Really, I’ve been... really nervous... and wondering if it was really okay to be in this troupe. It was always something above the clouds to me, that I always looked up to. Even though I’ve been getting to practice with all you amazing people... it’s been hard for me to move past that. So, um...”

“...We’d be worried if you decided to quit. If you went away all of a sudden like she did, everyone would...”

“She...?”

“...There was a friend of ours who suddenly left us. She had no problem getting lots of lead parts, and her acting was... well, it was good. So... when she left, it was hard for us to deal with.”

“Wow, I see... She must have been amazing if you’re praising her like that, Len. Oh! When Miss Meiko was talking about financial woes and trouble with “rebels” before I entered the troupe, she mentioned losing friends... Is that related...?”

He seemed to tremble a little bit, but I wasn’t sure. Our eyes briefly met, and his seemed to have a hint of sorrow, but he quickly turned aside.

“Well... yeah, some things happened. But, now you’ve joined us. ...I have high hopes for you. No, not just me. We all do.”

“...!!”

My heart lept up at Len telling me everyone had their hopes up for me. Still looking down shyly, he quietly added on, “Even if you do have a ways to go.”

“Um, well, I’ll try harder than ever! I really want to live up to your expectations, Mr. Len, and everyone else’s...!”

“That’d be appreciated. Oh... and the “mister” came back.”

“...Oh!”

“Anyway... Meiko asked me to come get you. Are you done with that?”

Hearing “that,” I looked down at the huge strewn pile of newspaper pages at my feet. I’d have to make a few more bundled newspapers to be finished. And once I was done, I’d then have to take them to the prop crew.

“...I’ll tell her, then. Go meet Meiko in the wings when you’re done.”

Len turned his heel and headed for the door.

“U-Um! You forgot this! Your bouquet!”

“...I’ll give those to you. They’re a good fit for you today... right down to the meaning of the flowers.”

“Huh...? But...”

“I’m a guy. I don’t get any joy from getting flowers.”

Len lifted his lips into a wonderful smile. Ah, I see... So this was the face he had when he was really “displeased.”

Picking up the bag of old newspapers with both hands, I left the second floor props room and went downstairs. On my way down the hall to the stage, I found Rin in front of the door to green room #2. She was carefully holding her shoulder bag in her hands, watchful of her surroundings. That unusual scene I’d seen in the green room before the show returned to my mind. I carefully observed Rin, and saw something move ever-so-slightly inside her bag. I approached her and spoke.

“Miss Rin!”

“Eh? Oh, Miku! Ahhh, umm...”

Suddenly, the cover on her leather bag was gently lifted up. A kitten lept out, landed on the floor, and quietly mewed.

“Waaah! A c-cat...”

“(Aaaah! Miku, shhh!)”, Rin whispered at me.

So she’d snuck a kitten into the green room. Pets weren’t allowed in the theater, so if any managers saw it, she’d probably get yelled at.

“...Did you... pick it up off the street?”

“Y-Yeah... Keep it a secret from everybody, okay? They’ll yell at me for picking up another one. But what else was I gonna do...?”

Rin had an uncomfortable look, looking up at me with serious eyes. Like a child whose prank got found out, frantic to patch things up with excuses. I’d always seen her as a cheery uplifter who stood on the same level as the adults of the company, so seeing her flustered and scrambling over a stray cat was a very new experience. Rin lifted up the kitten trying to run around mischievously.

“Have you picked up a lot of strays?”

“...Yeah. I just feel so bad for them. Its mother wasn’t nearby, and it was about to get run over by a car. And the streets were really busy this morning thanks to the fire at Harrods, right? If I’d just left it, then...”

Rin's expression was somewhat gloomy. She stared at the stray cat in her bag, but her gaze was uncertain, as if looking at something else past it. She went silent.

"I know how you feel. When I see an abandoned animal, somehow I can't just leave it. I didn't have parents myself, so when I saw kittens or puppies left alone without their parents, I always picked them up. Though my grandma would get mad at me..."

"Huh? Miku, you didn't have a dad either?"

"My dad... well, both my parents passed on right after I was born. So my grandmother raised me."

"I see..."

The kitten in Rin's arms slipped through and sunk back into her bag. It seemed to like it in there. Rin gently stroked the cat's head with her open right hand, and placed her left on her neck. I glanced at the locket she always wore around it.

"Um... Miss Rin, do you also not have...?"

Immediately, Rin stared piercingly at me. With a look like she was scouring through me for something. She had just the same eyes her brother did when I encountered him in the props room.

"W-Well... Yes, I have one, a father. And a mother too... probably."

Only looking sad for a brief moment, she instantly turned around

from her nervous attitude and put on her usual lively smile.

“Oh, but! This kitty has me now! So everything’s fine!”

“Are you planning to keep it? *Can* you keep it at your house...?”

“Yeah! I’m allergic, though!”

“Whaaa?! Is that going to work out...?”

“Yeah... Somehow! Len can help too.”

“...”

Was it safe for her to live with a cat if she was allergic to them? And she seemed unfazed right now, but I worried that she’d start to show an allergic reaction holding the cat like this. But she kept her composure and happily stroked the kitten’s throat again.

“I’m going to go leave it with a friend for now! I’ll be back in about ten minutes. After that, we’ll get ready for our afterparty in green room #1! We still aren’t fully prepared for tomorrow, are we? Were you headed back to the stage?”

“Oh, yes. There may be some things to clean up still...”

“Then can you tell the cast to meet in green room #1 when they’re all done? We’ll have a meeting about act two, and a nice little celebration for the success of the first day! Okay, Miku?”

“...Y-Yes!”

“Oh, and you can drop the “miss”! Just call me Rin.”

Just the same thing her brother had told me earlier...

“I was just thinking Len might’ve told you that, too.”

“How did you...?”

“I kneeew it! Aww, Len beat me to the punch again. He always runs ahead to snatch the best opportunities! Even though everyone *knows* it’s Rin who keeps spirits high in this company!”

Did the twins have some kind of telepathy? I was stunned that she’d guessed right about Len’s conversation with me in the props room. Unless, heaven forbid, she was listening from outside the room in secret...? It didn’t seem that way. Maybe this was a talent that came with the “insight” Len was talking about.

“Oh yeah, and Luka, too! Pleased with that handkerchief she gave you today?”

“Huh...? O-Oh, yes! It has such a cute design... It almost feels like a waste to use it.”

“Great! Actually, she bought it the other day when I went shopping with her. She looked so serious about trying to pick out the perfect one! Apparently, she wanted to wait until the show was all over and give it to you as a present then... Oh, but don’t tell her I said that, or she’ll get mad!”

With that, Rin waved her hand and ran off in a hurry. Once she was out of sight, I carefully took out the handkerchief Luka had given me and focused my eyes on it again. Luka, yes, *that* Luka, had picked this out just for me... The corners of my eyes heated up, and I pressed the handkerchief to them.

Everyone thought of me as a friend... That happy fact gave me the strength to keep doing my best tomorrow. I had to try harder, so

that I could at least repay them a little for all they'd given me. I'd steel myself for tomorrow, and make up for my mistake.

After Rin left, I went to the right wing of the stage. The backstage set crew, stagehands, and lighting staff were all gathered, more or less finishing up with their preparations for tomorrow. Kaito stood in the middle of them giving managerial directions. Over in the left wing, I saw Meiko, Gack, and Meg talking with the prop-maker Ia about something.

"...Oh yes, indeed! Then, too. Though she's usually very clumsy..."

"Ah... Now that you mention it, you're right. She was like another person entirely."

"Like? She totally was! Like she lept right out of the play!"

"I was really moved by her performance today, too! Miss Miku's helped me a lot with the props, even... Oh, Miss Miku!"

They appeared to be talking me up. I tried to hide my fidgety restlessness as I approached them.

"Well done, everyone...! Um, sorry to keep you waiting, Miss Meiko!"

"Well, I anticipated as much. Len and Rin caught you, didn't they?"

"Eh?! H-How did you know..."

Len, Rin, and now Meiko were correctly guessing my actions as accurately as if they were watching the whole time. It began to go

beyond surprise and strike fearful awe into me. As far as I could tell from their faces, everyone was just making mere guesses, so how in the world...

“How, you ask? Heehee... It’s a secret. But you’re really easy to read; everything shows on your face.”

“...Is it really that blatant?”

“Yes, very! But that’s a fine thing. Lovable, even.”

“L-Love...?”

“Indeed. I feel you have a very good character about you. It’s ador... cough, ahem! ...Ah, it’s magnificent.”

“M-Mr. Gack... *are* you actually praising Miss Miku? That thing you said to me earlier, too... “That blunder was truly magnificent! I haven’t seen such a hilari... cough, cough - pleasantly wonderful mistake in years!” I wasn’t sure if that was supposed to be pleasing or depressing.”

Ia looked up at Gack with scornful eyes, and he smiled awkwardly.

“Gack is quick to compliment anything as “magnificent,” but... sometimes that compliment isn’t particularly appreciated, hm? I was carrying some set parts once, and he told me “Miss Meiko, your upper biceps are truly magnificent. Very practically useful!” My pride was really hurt by that one...”

“W... Was it, now? I, ah... I meant it purely, from the heart...”

“Praising a lady’s biceps from the heart...? Mr. Gack, you really

don't know how to deal with a woman's feelings, do you! I mean, I can get really intense too when I'm writing, but I've still got the heart of a proper lady! You're always asking if I'm eating enough or if I'm hungry, but every time I hear that, I feel like you're making me out to be a glutton! I mean, it's true to an extent? But there are limits!"

"Oh, yes! He's done that to me, too..."

Like a dam bursting, the women spoke up about the thoughtless things Gack would casually say to them daily. He backed away in fear of their intensity, looking around wildly. He usually stayed calm and composed with a cocky smile, so it was amusing to see him flustered like this.

Gack was cool and orderly in appearance, very popular with women without any rumors of frivolity; a serious, kind, likable young man. But being such a good person, sometimes he'd slip up and I'd see him get a scolding, usually from his female colleagues. I'm not sure how to best describe it, but he was never doubtful of people, had a tendency of being too pure, and would be leniently forgiven at times when he should have been admonished, sometimes even applauded. And often times, this didn't please the women.

He winced, red-faced, and his eyebrows sank, quickly losing his usual mature dignity. Seeing him so droopy and shrunken-away reminded me of a dog being scolded by its master for doing something that it thought was good, and not understanding why. I felt a little sorry about it, so I came to his aid.

“Um... I think that sort of slight thickheadedness Mr. Gack has is just great! He usually always has this grown-up feeling to him, so from time to time, seeing him getting scolded and turning frantic... It's kind of cute, like watching a dog. I guess I just think it's great that he has all these sides to him.”

“Miss Miku...! Thank you very much.”

“...Miku? That... doesn't follow from what we said at all... And Gack, is that remark really something to be happy about? Sigh...”

With a great sigh, Meiko scrunched her face sourly, like sucking a lemon.

“Hmm... I can see some overlap between Miss Miku and Mr. Gack. I mean, maybe they're *trying* to be serious, but they're just out-of-it by nature. Sometimes I feel like I've run out of responses to their antics...”

“You do a good job even trying, Miss Meg... Well, I suppose that's part of these two's charm.”

“Ia, no need to kick them while they're down. But... yes, being serious and suave alone isn't very interesting... Maybe a few unfortunate elements here and there help to add flavor.”

“U-Unfortunate... elements, Miss Meiko...?”

“It's a compliment! Heehee...”

Once the lengthy teasing came to an end, Meiko, Meg, and Ia had bright smiles, and Gack beside them hung his head and drooped his shoulders with disappointment.

While Kaito was more of a feminist, Gack kept to some old customs rare in these times, striving for the traditional way of the gentleman. So he was fundamentally kind and sweet to women, and as a result of that personality, found it hard to make a rebuttal when they went off and berated him. After a sigh, Meiko turned back toward me.

“At any rate, Miku, back to business. It’s about that last scene today. Because of the broken clock, that part where you drop the letter was a little off, wasn’t it? Do you remember about where you dropped it? Just as close as you can recall; I was just thinking that since I’ll be the only one on stage at the start of the act, I’ll need to put that in position as well. Can you help me with that?”

“I understand. Oh, Miss Ia! I finished with these... Can you check them for me?”

After replying to Meiko, I handed Ia the bag of newspapers I was carrying.

“Wow, you did all of it... Thank you! That’s a huge help. It’s tedious work making these!”

“I’ll help any time you need it!”

Ia thanked me with a charming smile and went back to finishing up her other work. I then went back up on stage with Meiko to prepare for the beginning of act two.

“Helping with the prop-making... Now, that’s great!”

“Not really... I can’t really do anything significant...”

“Ia’s working double time to do the setpieces for this play too, so she’s really busy. I’m sure that even you helping out with the small tasks is a big help to her. We’re short on hands right now...”

I was reminded of earlier remarks about numerous people quitting during the conflict a year and half before I arrived here. Thus, in order to get the large-scale set for this play done in time, it seems all the backstage staff had to do extra work outside their usual fields.

“Everyone! Stay where you are and listen!”

Kaito, who’d been observing the entire stage and giving directions, began to shout directions loudly enough for everyone to hear.

“We’re almost done with the final adjustments for tomorrow’s set. Backstage staff, I know you have early-morning preparations to do, so head home for today and get some good rest. And the rest of you, finish up quickly so you can go home soon. All the cast members, we’re about to do our final checks for tomorrow. Sorry to wear you out, but as soon as we finish this, we’ll meet up in green room #1.”

“Um, Mr. Kaito. I know we’re backstage staff, buuut... we can still do what we like, right?”, the stagehand Mayu quickly asked from behind Kaito.

“Sure, as long as it won’t impact you tomorrow. Looking at the state

of things, I don't think we'll be able to do an afterparty for the whole crew. Tell everyone that for me. Oh, and Mayu... Don't drink too much. Good work today!"

"Okaaay! You too, Mr. Kaito!"

Mayu thanked Kaito, turned to the staff members behind her, and gave them a grin and an OK sign. With direct permission from the stage manager to party, the staff proceeded out in groups. It seemed they were all planning to have their own after-show celebration at a bar somewhere.

All of a sudden, I remembered Rin telling me to inform the cast about a minor celebration in the green room. I'd completely forgotten about it.

"Oh, Mr. Kaito! Mis... Er, Rin told me she was preparing a meeting for the cast to talk about tomorrow, and to have an afterparty."

"All riiight! Let's get drinking! I'll have to get Meg to make you-know-what again, heeheehee..."

Meiko put on a face-filling smile at the mention of the word "afterparty."

"Ohh, Meiko, do you just think of me as a handy drink dispenser?! I know you love beer and all, but it feels like you only consider me "useful" at times like these..."

Having worked at a bar in her bottom-of-the-ladder days, Meg knew a lot about alcohol. She was intimately familiar with cocktails,

all kinds of beer, and the tastiest ways to drink everything. I guess it was just her way to thoroughly master anything she got involved in, as she was apparently on the same level as first-class bartenders. In fact, it wasn't just beer; she was an expert in all drinks, particularly tea and coffee. I'd often seen the cast badger her to mix drinks for them. Particularly our beer- and tea-lover Meiko, of course.

"M-My... That's not true at all."

"Oh, reeeally?"

Meg glared right at Meiko's face with doubtful eyes.

"W-Well, yes, really! Besides, of course I recognize you can make more than just cocktails. Your tea is simply the most delicious thing...! Say, Miku, aren't you a big fan of Meg's tea too?"

Meiko quickly shifted the topic, looking for agreement. Meg turned toward me, still glaring.

"Eh? Y-Yes! The first time Miss Meg poured me her milk tea... I'd never gotten to drink such delicious tea before... It has such a heart-soothing flavor..."

"Well said, Miku. Yes, you're exactly right! Meg's a wonderful person, not just restricted to beer, but capable of making delicious tea, coffee, or any other drink. Truly dependable. And even so, her occupation is that of a playwright. And she's a stellar actress on top of all that? Such an inspiration!"

Meiko overbearingly sung Meg's praises, bringing in totally

unrelated topics. They were all *true* statements, but surely even Meg had to sense her true intents heaping this praise now, of all times.

“Ah, geeeeeze! Miss Meiko, that’s too much! You’re going to make me blush... All right! In commemoration of the success of today’s show, I’ll make your favorite Meiko Special!”

“Woohoo! So generous, our Meg! The famed baroness of beverages!”

“M-Miss Meg...?! (You do realize she’s back to only complimenting you for drinks...!)”

“A-hem! But of course! Despite appearances, I know all about drinks. The Meiko Special is mostly made from premium alcohol, so it would normally go for a very high price... But today, we splurge! Because today is the commemorable first production day of Crazy ∞ night! Miss Miku, I’ll make you a Miku-Miku Special for being such a hard-working lead actress, too!”

“Miku-Miku... Special...?!”

No, as usual, Meg was taken in by Meiko’s silver tongue. She would, once again, gladly be a handy drink dispenser. Gack watched the two of them wordlessly and sighed.

“...I feel they might be drinking a bit too much tonight.”

By the time I was done checking the start-of-act setup with Meiko,

it was already 11 PM. Kaito, Gack, and Meg had already gone upstairs, so only Meiko and the prop-maker Ia remained in the wings.

“Hey, Miku. Did Rin look okay?”

I was stuck for an answer to the sudden question. Okay? What could she possibly be asking about?

“Err... She seemed as energetic as usual, I guess...?”

“I see. That’s good. But... She does have asthma, you know, so I wonder...”

“Huh...?”

“Oh, did you not see? I was certain she was hiding another stray kitten or something in green room #2...”

“Ah... U-Um...”

Rin, Len, and Meiko kept anticipating my every action and thought as though they could see right through me, but Meiko in particular stood above the pack, I thought. She really did observe everyone’s slightest movements. Was it like an occupational disease for actors that the stage infected them with, or was it her natural attentive, meddlesome personality at work?

“...She told you not to say anything, didn’t she?”, Meiko smiled, putting a finger to her lips.

“Erm...”

“Heehee. You don’t have to hide it. This happens all the time.”

“Um... R-Rin... said she felt bad for it, and couldn’t just leave it,

so..."

"I'm well aware. Once she sees one, she just can't pass it by. But she is allergic to cats, and asthmatic to begin with. Her medication seems to be working well as of late, though. It used to be much worse."

"I didn't know that. So she'd go that far... she's a really nice person."

"...I can identify with her."

"Huh?"

"Say, do you know F. Milord?"

"Y-Yes! I mean... You mean *that* Mr. Milord! In the top three of West End's... no, the world's best actors...!"

"He's their father."

"Whaaaaat?!"

I was shocked. Mr. Milord was a longtime veteran actor known the world over, who got his start in West End doing theater, but worked in the world of movies as well. He had a graceful and beautiful appearance, somewhat shadowy features, and perfect acting talent that could instantly whisk the audience into the play's world. He'd been charming women around the world for over a decade.

"Now, this is strictly secret from the public. But she does seem to have opened her heart to you, so I'll tell you. I'd expect her to tell you sooner or later herself."

"Ah... Um, well. I won't disclose what you told me to anyone! Never!"

“Thanks.”

“But... Wow, so Mr. Milord had children... I didn’t even know he was married. But I guess... they do look like their father, don’t they?”

As the image of the famous actor came to mind and I compared him to the two of them, I really began to feel there was a resemblance.

“Naturally, though, their father abandoned them.”

“Huh? They were...?”

“Ever since they were babies, they were raised by their grandparents, never knowing who their mother was. Len tells me that Milord came to visit once a year or so - or maybe not even then, evidently. They were raised being told that their father was too busy with work to come home often, so there was nothing to do but accept it. But the two in their youth still looked forward to seeing their father, even not knowing when he’d come. Yet one day, they realized that was just an excuse. Their father had no interest in having children... so they were left to the grandparents.

“By that time, Len had faintly come to realize it already, but Rin was still holding onto a belief in her father’s goodwill... so it was traumatic for her. She always tries to steer conversations away from the topic of parents, you know. She can’t talk about it. If you force her to remember the trauma, she can start hyperventilating at worst.”

“...I... I see. So it was traumatic... Is that why? She asked me “you too”...”

“Huh? “You too”...?”

“Oh, um, both my parents died right after I was born, and my grandma raised me after that... But I never met my parents at all. It’s not traumatic for me. So you don’t need to worry about that with me.”

“Hmm. So you were also raised by your grandmother... Is she doing well?”

“Oh... actually... she passed away about a year ago. That’s what made me determined to follow my dream... I moved to West End right after that...”

As I spoke, I touched the bracelet on my left hand, a memento my grandmother had given me before she died.

“I’m sorry for making you remember painful times...”

Meiko looked concerned and sorrowful, as if she were suffering the loss herself.

“It’s okay! I’ll always have this memento of grandma with me, and I mean, I’m doing fine... She always told me it was her dream to see me strive toward my own dream.”

“Hee... You’re much stronger than you look. Your grandmother must have been well-assured about leaving her dream to you.”

Meiko smiled kindly, like a mother cradling her child.

“I’ll be fine, Miss Meiko. But I mean, is Len okay? Because, um...”

Meiko lifted up her slightly-lowered head, and with a bit of gloom in her eyes, spoke haltingly.

“Ah, Len, well... He’s much more mature than he looks... Rin is always cheery and thoughtful, but she really does get lonely, so she’s a bit delicate. I’m sure she still thinks about her father... Thus, Len knows he has to support her... I suppose. Also, Len... seems a bit more concerned about his mother than his father.”

“Um, and who would their mother be...?”

“...Well. That’s one thing I don’t even know. Not even whether she’s alive or dead, an actress like us or just a regular citizen... Len once went to ask his father about it directly, but he wouldn’t tell him. And Len realized that, if she were long dead, then there should be no reason to not at least tell him her name. The fact that Milord would hide that convinced him that she was still alive somewhere... He takes whatever chance he can get to search for his mother.”

“...”

“Don’t look so gloomy, all right? They’ll both be fine. They may be young, but they’re very supportive siblings. And Kaito’s quite caring to Rin too, you know?”

“Oh, yes...”

“It seems even Kaito was in a similar situation to Rin in his youth, so they understand each other’s loneliness well. That’s why he fawns over her like a father.”

“Wow, I see... Even Kaito?”

“Indeed, I think everyone has had difficult pasts. But now, we’re here. And we have friends.”

“Friends...”

I was envious. The people of this troupe were all somewhat unusual and individualistic, and yet... their feelings were always one. The bonds they shared were very warm ones.

“And you’re one of them, of course.”

“Huh...?”

“Everyone’s long accepted you as a friend, you see? Well, all right, I suppose it hasn’t been that long. You can take it slowly, at your own pace... But I’d be happy if you could start thinking of us as friends, too.”

“N-No way...! I-I do! I really do think of you as, um...”

“My, really? Thank you, Miku.”

“Y... Yes!”

“Well... We got a little sidetracked, didn’t we? The others are waiting for us. Shall we go?”

“Oh, sorry! Miss Meiko, you can go ahead and start the afterparty... I still need to do a little... um...”

I glanced toward the stage. The spotlight was still on, and Ia remained all by herself. She was fixing the clock I’d broken hours ago.

“All right. Come quickly once you’re finished, okay?”

Seeming to understand perfectly without me saying anything, Meiko went ahead to the green room. Once she was gone, I approached Ia, standing in the spotlight and fixing the clock, to ask if I could help at all.

“Oh, Miss Miku! Thank you for helping me out earlier. I’ll be all done once this is fixed, so don’t worry!”

“Um... I’m sorry. It was my carelessness that broke it... I know it’s my fault you’re staying late...”

She held the clock hands that I’d forcefully smacked and knocked off during the show. I heard that the crew went looking around everywhere for a grandfather clock with just the perfect design for the play, and finally got their hands on a real antique one. It was made slightly differently from modern clocks, so Ia seemed at a loss, not knowing how the internals worked.

“I really don’t know how to apologize...”

“Please, don’t worry about it! I think the reason the hands came off was because the screws were loose. This thing is so old, it took some doing just to make it work. This kind of thing happens all the time... Now, first I need to work out why it’s stopped, fix that, then just put on the hands... Umm... Do I put a screw in this hole...?”

“Wow... So this is what the inside of a clock looks like. Oh, do you put this in?”

I squatted down next to Ia and handed a small piece by her feet to her.

“Thank you. I really don’t know anything about machines either, but Mr. Kaito taught me a thing or two about clocks when we bought this. He seems to know a lot... In fact, I think he collects old curios and things. This clock was actually pretty expensive, but he wanted it the moment he saw it and paid out of his own pocket.”

“...Wow... I can’t believe I broke something so important...”

“You only took the hands off, it’s no big deal! Not even Mr. Kaito is angry about that at all, and we’ve all broken our share of things... a lot of things. Let’s see, what was the worst of it... Oh right, probably the time Miss Luka... In the heat of her performance, she scribbled all over a painting that had historical value... That was *really* bad. Ahahaha...”

Ia laughed, seeming to remember what the scene had been like. But deep in her eyes, I could sense she wasn’t laughing much at all. I’d only just joined the troupe, and my eyes weren’t as sharp as everyone else’s, so there was a lot I didn’t know. Like Kaito having a collection hobby, or the disaster Luka had caused - I hadn’t had the slightest knowledge.

The cast and staff were all strict, yet very kind people, so I wanted to do my best for and with them. But time... time was something I couldn’t fill in right away, no matter what I did.

“So, you know, everyone has their oddities, but they’re good-

natured people, so you'll soon get along just fine with them, Miss Miku... Well, I mean, aren't you already pretty friendly?"

Ia, as if sensing the doubt in my mind, threw me some encouraging words.

"Well... maybe... They're almost as friendly as family."

"Hmm. I've been here almost ten years now, and it's not like everyone was a member from the very beginning. Back when I joined, Miss Meiko was still a newcomer. Then Mr. Kaito sort of wandered here. Miss Meiko happened to meet Mr. Kaito in a back-alley bar around here while he was on vacation, they hit it off, and she scouted him. Then she found out he was the son of a wealthy family..."

"Whaaat?! A-A wealthy...?!"

"Hm, well, he always tries to keep it secret, so a lot of people don't know."

"He keeps it secret?"

"I don't think he wants to inherit the family business, is the thing. It's a long-standing noble family that's been around for generations, and I think his father is the CEO of a big global corporation that represents our country... So, ever since Mr. Kaito was young, he was given a gifted education, and was groomed to lead the company. A very strict upbringing, he said. In response to that harsh life, it was the brief periods of amusement he was given between his studies that he looked forward to more than anything else."

“His mother loved Burlet plays too, so that influence led the two of them... Oh, but his mother was frail, so she passed away when he was young. Maybe in response to that, Mr. Kaito secretly trained to someday become an actor. When Miss Meiko brought him in to the troupe, he was dressed very strangely. Apparently, he’d fled home and went running all around the world in disguise, trying to get away from his father.”

I recalled how Kaito’s elegant way of drinking lemon tea in the green room made me imagine a royal palace or mansion as the backdrop, so I told him he reminded me of a butler in such a place as that. Meiko and Luka laughed at it, neither confirming or denying, but to think he really was a noble... At the same time, I realized how rude it must have sounded to him, and my head drooped down with a bit of self-loathing again.

“Oh, so... that’s why...”

Ia took a thoughtful pose, wondering how to interpret me drooping my head, then continued on.

“So, we quickly found that Mr. Kaito was qualified to join, and he started taking part in new plays. But at last, he was found... One day, a while after he joined, men in black suits and sunglasses - very tough-looking - suddenly intruded into the company. They were his father’s secretaries, here to try and take Mr. Kaito back by force. And they put on the pressure: they said that if he didn’t come back home, who knew what would happen to this already half-folded troupe...”

“They threatened to use their influence to ruin you...?”

“Right. Everyone was shocked, and begged them not to do that. Miss Meiko in particular wore herself out trying to persuade Mr. Kaito’s father again and again.”

“But there wasn’t any motion to, um... to drive him out? Since he’d only just arrived and brought all this trouble with him...”

“I thought things might pan out that way at first, too. But people with a real passion for Burlet plays are the troupe’s most valuable assets. Everyone banded together to keep such assets from being stolen out from under them. Everyone from the managers to the actors unified... there were a lot of fierce people willing to fight for him. I guess that’s still true.”

“Amazing...”

“Isn’t it? So everyone decided to protect Mr. Kaito no matter what came of it. And what do you think Mr. Kaito did?”

“Huh? Well, I don’t think someone responsible like him would just silently go along with it and let the troupe go under...”

“He told his father that he’d show him a play - a *real* play, and then he could make his judgement. His father supposed it would be the last play Mr. Kaito ever did. Then he got *seriously* busy... I think he made a play with all the main cast in just a month. For one of Burlet’s most famous works, Oath of Black...

“So we put on that show, but... in the last scene, Mr. Kaito’s role, the angel, atones for his sins and commits suicide with a fruit knife.

And there... Mr. Kaito actually did stab himself. At first, everyone was stunned by what a true-to-life performance it was, but then we saw blood was really coming from his stomach... We panicked. Even his father's face went pale, and had an unbelievable expression. We hurried him to the hospital, but he was unconscious for two or three days... He was on the border of life and death. The whole time, his father was flustered. He never imagined he'd do something so stubborn."

"..."

"When Mr. Kaito finally woke up, everyone in the room wept with joy. But Miss Meiko alone slapped Mr. Kaito, who was still totally calm, really hard... "Why did you do something so idiotic, you idiot?!", she yelled. And Mr. Kaito replied. "If it were going to be my last play, I wanted to truly show the potential of theater. I wanted to challenge myself to see how real a thing I could make using the fake world of plays... I know I worried you, but if I were saying goodbye to theater for life, then I wouldn't have any regrets having died that way."

"Hearing this, even his father was forced to admit his devotion to acting. In fact, he said he would provide support to the troupe - but Mr. Kaito refused to ever rely on his father's aid. He'd willfully chosen to walk this path, so he'd someday succeed and bring the troupe back from its money woes."

"...That must have been... so difficult for you..."

"If we had outright accepted his father's support, all our monetary problems would probably clear up just like that... But we wouldn't

be able to say we “got back on our feet” in any *real* sense. We have to do something about the past decade’s trend of theater culture as a whole declining. We have to get more visitors, and get back the prosperity of this culture, or we can’t call it a comeback. That’s what Mr. Kaito said. And I agree with him. We’ll keep making good plays... and bring in as many people willing to spare their time to see us as we can.”

“That’s true... Even if it’s entertainment that isn’t making much money, it’s still entertainment for those people. But if no one finds it fun, then they’ll start to feel like no one wants it, not even for free...”

“Yeah. Something changed in everyone after that incident. Like everyone was strongly bound together by one belief, one ideal... They felt a duty to bring joy to the audience’s hearts by putting on good plays together. And Crazy ∞ nighT provided that opportunity. It has a great sensational aspect, the script actually is a very interesting one, the production’s had a lot of time and effort put in, and the cast puts all our stars on display, and they’ve practiced like mad. So we really hope this can be the chance for a big revival of interest in the Burlet Company...

“Well, then again, we can’t really afford to take our time to make everything ideal. Our financial situation is pretty bad, and the managers are holding their heads daily. And that’s *with* the help of the sponsor company we’ve been longtime partners with, and Mr. Kaito’s father providing just enough help in secret that Mr. Kaito won’t find out. Oh, and that Burlet-loving businessman... Mr. Len’s

gentleman with the roses. Even with all that, the debts win out. It's just so expensive putting on a Burlet play, since you can't make concessions with the sets, the costumes, the actors, anything. But that's also kind of a point of enjoyment that keeps us going."

"So that's why Mr. Kaito is always so determined... No, and Len... And everyone else..."

"Oh, for the record, Mr. Kaito's made up with his father, so they get along alright now. Sometimes he goes back to his old home on vacations. Although, I hear he's also getting pressured to marry already so the grandkid can actually inherit the family this time..."

Ia spoke with a bit of a pained smile.

"Every person in this troupe seems to have... overcome something major, it seems like. It's amazing."

"Sure thing. I think the actors in particular have had an above-average amount of suffering and effort to put in. For the troupe... and for themselves who love the troupe. Mr. Kaito and Miss Meiko have been here just over ten years, Miss Luka, Miss Rin, and Mr. Len for about five...? And about three or four years ago is when the financial problems started to visibly worsen. Around that time - and at roughly the same time - Miss Meg who was working to become a playwright and Mr. Gack who managed an independent farm asked if they could do anything for the Burlet Company they so loved, so they joined.

"They were still busy with their other jobs, so they had to juggle

both. Still, having needed to learn a lot about it to write plays, Miss Meg's acting was quite good, and she soon entered the main cast. Oh, and Mr. Gack! He'd been part of the cast for a troupe in another country, and he had experience and natural talent that let him adapt to any role. Everyone was glad to gain such powerful allies and worked in total cooperation with them to get back on their feet.

"So whatever it takes, we want to succeed with this lost play... This chance to save ourselves financially. It's had a year of preparation, and a lot has happened in that time. ...We've gained things, but we've lost just as much..."

Kaito had said the same thing Ia just did. "Many things have been lost..." And Meiko and Len both brought up a friend who they'd suddenly lost...

"Absolutely... I heard there was a friend you lost..."

"Ah! Where did you hear that?"

"Um... From Len? ...Should I not have heard about it, maybe?"

"...Nah. Hmm, Mr. Len... Well, you see, up until shortly before you joined, Miss Miku, we had a star actress who filled a lot of lead roles. She and Miss Luka always took the spots for heroines..."

Ia spoke of her with a hint of tragedy in her voice.

"She was very friendly with everyone in the troupe, especially the actors, and even helped out the backstage staff often... She was

such a good person. And with Crazy ∞ nighT too, she really...”
“Hm?”

“A-Ah... Look at me, saying silly things! Sorry, don’t worry about it, okay? Now we have you here, Miss Miku... Yes, the lead role of Crazy ∞ nighT, that’s Miss Miku. No buts about that!”
“...?”

Seeing Ia talk so hastily, I got nervous wondering if I heard something I shouldn’t have. After a short silence with her wearing a pained expression, her kind and good-natured smile returned, and she spoke again.

“Oh, speaking of which... during the auditions for Crazy ∞ nighT, I was watching in secret from the back. And as I watched, I kept thinking, there’s no way we can have a total novice newcomer play the lead in a Burlet play... And since there were so many participants, judging took three days. Everyone was getting pretty exhausted. But toward the end of the third day... someone perfect for the part appeared. We almost felt like the Villager herself had come out of the script... She was a little shaky, but the mood about her was just perfect for representing the world of the play. Yes, that was you, Miss Miku.”

“!! N-No way... I’m not really... I still have a long way to go. Even Len told me so.”
“But did Mr. Len also tell you how much faith we have in you?”
“...!”

“Right? There’s no doubt about it. So please, have confidence!”

“But... I messed up today...”

“And that’s fine! You can recover. The play’s only just started.”

Ia grinned and gave me a playful wink. No, brooding about it wouldn’t get me anywhere, would it? I had to answer to everyone’s expectations.

“...Alright then, looks like it’ll work now. Just need to put the hands on!”

While we were talking, it seemed Ia had nearly finished repairing the clock.

“Oh, good...!” I reached for the two clock hands to give them to her.

“Oh! Be careful, Miss Miku! The hour hand there used to be a knife, apparently. Or maybe this was a clock meant to hide a knife in... it’s not really clear. It’s pretty sharp at any rate, so be careful not to cut yourself.”

“O-Okay!”

As I carefully lifted it, I found it did have a lot of weight to it. The hour hand’s edge was neatly sharpened, so I took care in picking it up and handing it to Ia.

“Hmm, maybe in this little gap... Huh? These hands *did* go here, right? Weird. How do you get them to fit...?”

“Huh...”

While at a glance it seemed like they would fit, the size of the holes didn't seem to match up, so they wouldn't go on.

"Maybe I should ask Mr. Kaito? All I need to do is get them back on..."

"...Oh, well, I can take them to him later and ask directly. I need to apologize to Mr. Kaito, anyway... I mean, he was the one who found and bought this clock."

I took both hands back from Ia. Since the hour hand was dangerous, I carefully wrapped my handkerchief around it and put it away in my pocket.

"So, I guess I can leave that to you?"

"Yes! Um, I'm sorry for making you stay so late. I know all the other backstage staff has gone home already... I'll turn off all the lights and things, so Miss Ia, you can go."

"Thank you. Okay, guess I should get ready to leave."

Ia stood up and started cleaning up the screwdrivers and pliers lying around. As I helped her, I took a look around to see if there was anything else. I noticed the wall clock in the wing of the stage said it was past 11:30. It had gotten really late.

"Um, Miss Miku?"

"Yes?"

"Today's performance was really wonderful. I mean, I joined the company because I love Burlet's plays, too."

"..."

“It was always my dream. I’m not the type to stand up on stage, but I wanted to do the job of supporting the world of the play from behind like this. I’d heard that with movies on the rise and theater declining, the Burlet Company might go under, but I still wanted to do it. It’s not a great salary, there’s a lot of work, and no overtime pay... But I really feel like this is work worth doing.

“And with Burlet’s lost work Crazy ∞ nighT being found, we’ll be able to keep going on. It’s kind of a dreamlike twist, and it makes my heart happy. But the most fantastic thing is our Cinderella, Miss Miku, selected as the lead actress out of the blue! Thanks to you, this troupe can recover.”

“T-Thanks to me...? I never did... I was only picked as the lead by chance. It feels like a dream to me that any of this is happening... Like an unseen force is guiding me, not like I’m doing it myself. And not to mention, today I messed up Burlet’s script...”

“Well, being led by the forces of chance is a quality of a star! There isn’t much charm to a protagonist who can resolve everything all by herself, is there? Like for some reason, people stop wanting to help her, and she runs into random misfortune, but in the end, she gets really lucky and marries the prince or something. I think the power the lead of a story has to move their surroundings is really charming.

“Besides, I know you’ve practiced more than anyone else, Miss Miku. You’re putting in tons of effort! You always come really early

and practice in that unused cellar, right? Everyone knows.”
“...!”

Don't tell me someone was watching that amateurish practice...? And not just Ia, but everyone had seen? My face burned like wildfire.

“Heehee. The people who watch really watch close. Look, no matter how terrible a showing there is for a performance, there's always an audience member in the special seats. I call him Baron Von Silkhat, personally. In fact, long ago, the company might have called Mr. Burlet himself that. Anyway, he's a gentleman who loves Burlet, and I guess in imitation of him, he lets his bangs cover his eyes and always wears an antique silk hat. I'm sure people like him are glad to see you perform, Miku. And I bet starting with this, you already have a ton of fans!”

“I-I...”

“You definitely do! Just have confidence - you're the lead! Anyway, I'm done cleaning, so I'll go now. And ask Mr. Kaito about the hands!”

“Understood!”

“Aren't you tired too, Miss Miku? Get some rest. Good work!”

“Okay! T-Thank you!”

“The people who watch really watch close,” huh... Baron Von Silkhat - could the gentleman I bumped into on the street this morning be the same one Ia was talking about? Certainly, in all the surviving portraits of him, Mr. Burlet was portrayed as a gentleman

wearing a silk hat, with thick bangs long enough to hide his eyes, and many impassioned fans tried to imitate that style. To think that gentleman always bought special tickets for our performances...

Once Ia left, and I was alone on the stage... I stepped into the center of the spotlight which still shone. I was a little unsteady on my feet; Ia was right that I was pretty exhausted. Starting with my strange dream, then running through the crowded street, arriving late, the busy events in the green room, the show itself, my unexpected mistake in the midst of it, and my conversations with everyone afterward... I threw out my hands and shook them, as if to shake off the emotions I'd been carrying since morning.

They all even knew about my supposedly-secret early-morning practice. The emotions behind my every action, and the surrounding actions too - it was all evident to everyone in this company, they saw right through me. I was so embarrassed to learn that they could practically tell everything I was thinking. However, moreso than that, I was incredibly glad that anyone was paying that much attention to me.

Behind my eyelids, I imagined a common sight from my youth. Walking a little bit into the small forest near my house, there was an wide open thicket. There was no one there but me; no cast, no staff, nothing at all, so I put on an imaginary play where I was the lead. Once the play was done, I would then become my own audience and applaud myself. No one was around then, but... I wanted there to be people who would watch me someday, and applaud me. So I thought of it as training for that. And tonight, for

the first time in my life, I received real applause.

Now I was standing on stage. *The Burlet Company* stage I'd always aspired to. Has my dream come true, grandma? On the back of the old bracelet, her memento, which she too had inherited from her mother, was clearly written the name "Burlet."

Walking around the stage absent-mindedly, looking over the empty seats, I noticed something glint in the corner of my eye. I turned to it and saw something white on the floor. I don't suppose it was the letter prop I'd dropped at the end of act one? I approached and picked it up.

"Huh? It's addressed to me... And... I thought I saw it shine..."

The prop hadn't had any name written on it, so this didn't seem to be that. I inspected it all over for a means by which it could have shined, but it was perfectly normal paper. There was no sender, yet it was addressed to me. Who in the world could it be from?

I opened the envelope and read through the letter inside. Instantly, the information written there poured into my head like a flood. My hands trembled, and I was struck with an illusion - as if the world I'd believed in was just a distant fairytale, and everything was in the world of the play all along.

Trying to push down the violent emotions welling up in me, my head came to be dominated by bizarre feelings. My legs took one step, then another. In the distance, I thought I heard the buzzer

sound. And the applause of a single person. But once I started to run, I couldn't stop, and I hurried down off the stage.

Chapter 4: Beginning of the Everlasting Night

As my eyes tried to focus on an unfamiliar ceiling, I went back through my memories from this morning. After that long recollection, I took a big, deep breath, and looked around at my surroundings.

I'd woken up on a bed with a splendorous canopy. I remembered arriving late to the theater in the morning, curtain rise, act one concluding, helping with prop-making... being teased by Len, telling Meiko about Rin picking up a stray kitten... Then when I was alone on the stage, I picked up a letter and went to read it... and then what? I thought I heard the buzzer for curtain rise in the distance... But as much as I focused my thoughts, my head was blank, and I couldn't remember what happened next.

Was this... one of the green rooms? I hadn't slept well the day before, so I was at peak fatigue. Maybe once the first day was finally over, I had a dizzy spell and collapsed. I looked out the window and saw a beautiful full moon high in the sky, crossing the meridian... Which meant it was still only midnight? The wind blew fiercely outside, shaking large tree branches. The rain seemed to have stopped.

Suddenly, I heard loud sounds mixed in with the wind - thump, thump, thump. What could be making that? An eerie noise that seemed to reverberate off something from far away. Though I could hear it clearly like it were right at my ear, it was so echoey to imply the source was quite distant. But taking a look around, there was no

one in the room... Then the sound stopped. I was probably just hearing things.

More importantly, what was everyone else up to? I told Meiko to start the afterparty without me, so surely they were already partying in green room #1. It had gotten so late. I had to hurry...

Getting out of the bed and taking one look around the unfamiliar room, I turned the doorknob and went out into the hallway. Lamps were placed every few meters along the wall of the dim hallway, shining dubious light.

Did the theater have a hallway like this? The century-old theater did have some parts renovated over the years, but for the most part retained the same gorgeous Adam-style interior from its construction... Yet the lights, windows, walls, display shelves and chairs, carpet... Everything I saw was clearly different from what I was used to. Everywhere I looked, I saw the same unified style of furniture. Had they remodeled while I was asleep...? No, that was ridiculous, and would take more than a day.

Heading down the long hallway, I saw the grand stairs and hall up ahead. They, too, were similar, yet different from the theater I knew. Where could this possibly be? I peered down the hallways surrounding the stairwell. Then, I noticed Rin and Len squatting in front of a clock in the hall below. But were the stairs always so long? The two of them seemed close enough, yet felt very far away.

“Rin! Len!”

I leaned on the handrail and raised my voice to call out to them. But they didn't respond to me. Could they not hear me? I shouted again, louder.

"Hey! You two!"

The two of them spun toward me at nearly the same time.

"AhhHH... YOU broke the CLOCK..."

"Oh NO, OH no! Time has COME to a STOP! You said IT! If ONLY this MOMENT could last FOREVER! The clock MUST have HEARD your wish! YahaHAHA...!"

Those lines... They were the ones the twin prodigies had adlibbed after my unbelievable accident broke the clock - managing to take advantage of it, amazingly, but also just so *the show could go on*. Were they lapsing back to the first act that had already ended? Maybe they were still doing their usual practice of fully assuming their roles. Rin especially liked pranks, so she'd be likely to tease me - by acting out the scene I'd messed up again.

"...Um, really, I'm so grateful for what you did then. Thanks to you two, the show didn't have to stop, which was such a relief. Anyway, um... I guess I fell asleep. I might have collapsed? Did someone carry me to a bed? I really can't remember much..."

"COLLAPSED...? What DO you MEAN?"

"Don't ask ME!"

"Huh...?"

So I hadn't collapsed, at least. But then why was I sleeping in a bed?

"EVERYone went TO bed on THEIR own TWO feet!"

"Yes, to BED THEY went, to SLEEP!"

"Everyone...? S-So everyone is asleep but you two?!"

They did say they'd discuss things for tomorrow and party in the green room, so maybe they just drank too much and got incredibly sleepy. I mean, I wasn't the only one who was tired, so it was possible... But then why were these two awake?

"Yes. BeCAUSE, the parTY's over, so eveRYONE went to THEIR rooms."

Though I didn't know that, not having participated in that party. Unless, don't tell me; I *did* take part, but drank so much I forgot about it... That couldn't be it, right? I did feel my head ache a little when I tried to trace my memories, but surely that couldn't be from a hangover.

As for this place... If this wasn't the theater, it was possible it was a high-class hotel in some corner of West End which Kaito... or possibly Luka, had paid for us to stay at.

"BeSIDES, the play HAS stopped."

"Huh...?"

"TIME has stopped!"

"LOOK! Because THE clock is BROken, TIME in the PLAY has

STOPPED!”

Rin pointed to a grandfather clock stopped just a few minutes before midnight. It looked remarkably like the clock I’d broken at the end of act one.

“HeeHEE... It’s STOPPED... YahaHAha!”

Rin laughed, again with her unnaturally stiff Doll Girl expression plastered on her face. Why did things feel so off? We were having a conversation, yet I had the feeling that things were somehow misaligned. Something’s fishy here... I hurried down the stairs, and the two slowly stood up. The strange sense of distance I’d felt earlier, why they seemed to be so far away, it was because...

Rin was a little bit shorter than me. Len was about that same height. And yet before me now were dolls that came up to around my hips. Yes, so it seemed - two genuine dolls.

“Ball joints...?”

In observing the small doll boy, I noticed... unmistakable, ball-jointed doll legs. Not just makeup for the play, but actual doll legs, of a distinctly different shape from the legs a human would normally have.

“Well, YES? Didn’t WE tell YOU? We’re DOLLS!”

“W-Why...?”

“WHY...? You mean, WHY do dolls HAVE ball JOINTS? Or WHY are

we DOLLS that can TALK? BeCAUSE we told you THAT, too; our PART is to be LIVING dolls!”

My spine shivered at their grinning, joyous, eerie smiles. No. What I was asking was, “*Why have you turned into dolls?*” Len had been turned into an actual doll. And while her dress hid it, perhaps Rin, too... Glancing toward her dress, I saw she had the exact same grin as her twin.

Yes, in the play, they were supposed to act as living dolls, and both had put in endless practice to easily assume that role. But what I was seeing now was the actual dolls themselves from Crazy ∞ nighT. The twins were just as prodigious as was claimed, with talent and intelligence that matched the adults, so little things wouldn’t throw them into confusion. But how could they stay so calm about their bodies being turned into dolls...? No, not even that, how could it look like they were *enjoying* this situation?!

I fearfully looked Rin in the eyes. Sparkling with curiosity, they looked back at me.

They were big. Even bigger than her usual eyes, which were big enough... Just like a doll’s in that way. They were so glass-like, I could only see them as truly being glass. I kept my gaze fixed, and she didn’t even blink, nor did she look away. And still she looked up at me joyously. Her lips were slightly lifted, but her eyes didn’t indicate a smile... and I saw no pupils in the back of the glass balls.

I wanted to run, to get away from these terrifying two at once, but

my legs wouldn't budge, as if temporarily paralyzed. I'd completely cramped up. I-I had to say something... I could only hear my pulse loudly beating in the quiet hall. I was afraid of this silence. I was afraid of these creatures in front of me!

"Um, I, I'm, c, curious about the others... I-I'll go see them!", I finally wrung out.

"Okay! GOT it!"

My legs finally moved, and quickly took me down the dim hallway left of the hall without looking back. I could hear the twins' giggling from behind, echoing off the tall ceiling. I felt an uneasiness in my chest, and I just couldn't bear to stay there any longer.

Rin and Len were scary... No. That wasn't them. Just thinking about the reason they made me feel frightened was scary. A thought that had briefly crossed my mind upon waking up, then settled down in the corner, crawled up my neck again. It can't be... No, it can't. That's not possible! At any rate, I had to find someone, and call for help. Call for...

That's right. I should go outside. Even after 10 PM, I'd seen lots of fans waiting for us to come out on the street. And today was a Friday, and the nights were long in West End. So somebody would surely be out there. I quickly went back the way I came to the hall, hoping I didn't have to meet those two again... Once I made it to the end of the hallway, I peered into the hall, glancing toward the

clock. They weren't there anymore. I sighed with relief.

I put my hand on the front door. But pushing and pulling wouldn't budge it an inch. I wondered why... It didn't look locked. I shoved it with the weight of my whole body, but still nothing. Were there any other exits? Aha! Maybe I could escape out the windows in the south hallway. Those windows shouldn't be locked... Gotta get to the hallway...

At that point in my thoughts, my legs, which were headed back for the same hallway I'd just tried to go down before, came to a halt. How did I already know...? I wasn't looking anywhere but ahead of me earlier, and certainly not at the windows. I gulped down my spit. Head still reeling in confusion, I took careful steps, one at a time.

Paintings large and small hung on both sides of the hallway. They had varying motifs, from landscapes to people, and the moonlight coming in the windows added color to their worlds. Finally, I arrived at the large window on the first floor, and sure enough, it wasn't locked. I applied force just as with the front door. But this too wouldn't open. It started to drizzle again outside. Trees shook in the strong winds, and the forest appeared particularly eerie.

Forest... Why was I in a forest? A forest in the dead of night. An unknown mansion. Rin and Len looking like actual dolls. And despite me surely never being here before, I knew where things were... How did my body know with pinpoint accuracy about the windows in the south hallway?

That unthinkable possibility crept up closer to my vision, and I resisted the urge to just nod to it any second now. This was the spitting image of the play's world... The world of Crazy ∞ nighT...

I didn't know this mansion; I'd never been here... But the Villager in the play knew about it. Because before the party, she'd gone with the maid and the dolls to help shut the windows... That minor detail, about the windows in the south hallway of the first floor, was written in the script. My heart pounded like an alarm, and my body shook. I'm dreaming... that's what I wanted to believe. But if this really were the world of the play... I ran back down the hallway and approached the clock I'd seen earlier in the hall.

"What are you doing there?"

I was startled by the sudden echoing voice and looked around wildly to find its source. Kaito stood in the hallway upstairs.

"Mr. Kaito!"

I called his name, relieved to see our dependable leader. Unlike Rin and Len, he looked perfectly normal and human. I ran up the stairs to him.

"I wouldn't recommend running; this mansion is old, and the steps are rather steep. An accident once happened here, you see."

"Huh...?"

"There are many strange things about this mansion... And there's much I don't know, even after years living here. I'm almost tired of

hearing about curses this and ghosts that. Now then, everyone's waiting in the living room."

"Um, Mr. Kaito...!"

I approached and looked him in the eye, then spoke with desperation similar to earlier today.

"I just saw it. There's something strange about Rin and Len! They're dolls... Their limbs turned ball-jointed! The two of them turned into real Doll Twins! Tell me, where... where is this? What happened while I was asleep?!"

Kaito blinked a few times, then tilted his head slightly.

"Hmm...? What are you saying? The doll twins have always had ball joints... I received them at the same time I received this mansion from my grandfather. I heard that they were created by the witch who lived in this forest... But she's gone now. So I suppose I can't say for sure whether they always had such joints..."

"T... That's not what I meant! Weren't they human? Until just a while ago!"

"...I don't know what you're thinking, but when I inherited them as master of this mansion, they were already dolls. I don't know what exactly the witch did... but perhaps it was something of that nature. They've also been able to talk like humans ever since that time..."

Shocked, I turned away from his stare. It was the same feeling as when I talked to Rin and Len... He was talking just as if he really

were...!

“...”

“Did you... see something frightening here on these stairs? Like a ghost, say.”

“...!”

I sensed his always-kind eyes turning faintly cold. A young aristocratic lord with the blood of a long-standing family, refined and educated. His cold gaze carrying a slight grief, he was the master of the mansion, with the duty of organizing the eccentric residents... That was his expression. The usual calm and kind leader who got us all in order, had a weakness for women, and was easily won over by Rin... This was completely different from that gentle personality of his.

“Sigh... Well, we certainly wouldn’t be surprised to hear that you *did* see a ghost. Strange things appear to be happening in this mansion.”

His grief-shrouded eyes clouded a little bit more.

“It would seem the next page of the script has gone missing.”

Chapter 5: The Stolen Page

All the cast besides Kaito and myself had already gathered in the living room. I sipped on tea which Meg poured me.

As I slowly inspected everyone one by one... I had a sudden flash of déjà vu. In act one of the play, the Villager entered the mansion in the woods and looked over each of the mansion's residents; this scene felt exactly the same, with people who emanated a very similar mood. A giant crystal chandelier hung from the center of the semi-cylindrical ceiling, and indeed, less than half of its candles were lit, giving the room an unsettling gloom. The cast and the set... Wherever I turned my gaze, I saw a perfect recreation of the world in the play's script.

The Mistress, Meiko, elegantly sipping tea, put her teacup down in her saucer with a serious look.

"To think that the next page would be gone..."

"Oh, what should we do? The play can't go on like this. Heehee... That's kind of exciting, though!"

"My word, such a serious problem... Time appears to have stopped."

Meg and Gack... I watched their interaction out of the corner of my eye. The Maid, whose mouth claimed she was worried, but so deeply enjoyed trouble and incidents, and the Butler, who wouldn't stop polishing silverware even when everyone else was concerned - no situation would dissuade him from diligently attending to his

work. There were resemblances to the way they usually were, but I could see some major differences.

Meg was one to often get caught up in things, but she would never joke around about matters which clearly concerned the others. And when Meg's mischief did cross the line, Gack would always lightly rebuke her. I didn't feel that comfortable sense of stability between them now. But... Just maybe, they only happened to be acting that way right now. I had to properly ask them, not just make guesses.

"Um... Miss Meg... and Mr. Gack?", I said to them. But they didn't even turn my way.

"What is it, miss Villager?"

Rather than the two I was trying to talk to, Meiko sitting beside me spoke with concern, her face still gloomy.

"E-Er...! I want to talk to Miss Meg and Mr. Gack..."

I turned to look at Meg, and made eye contact with her. She gazed at me like she was looking at something truly strange. Gack, too, kept a grave face and showed no reaction to me saying his name.

"Miss Villager, are you all right?"

Villager... That was my name in the play. Since the Villager didn't want to give her name, the others also refused to tell her anything about themselves... And the plot went on like that.

It couldn't be... So calling them by their real names wouldn't get through to them at all? I thought back on when I was talking to Kaito in the hallway. I said "Rin," "Len," even Kaito's own name, but his response to them all was the same mystified look, and he only referred to Rin and Len as the Doll Twins.

"Mr. Kaito!"

I tried calling Kaito by name again. But no one showed any reaction to it. Naturally, even Kaito himself seemed totally unconscious of being Kaito, and just sat there shooting me a suspicious glare. Sweat ran down my cheeks, and my heart beat fast.

"Have you... Have you all forgotten? Listen to me! Have you forgotten about yourselves, about the real world?! This clearly isn't reality! I-It's a strange world... the world of the play! Miss Luka... Miss Meiko?!"

Unable to stand their bizarre reactions, I stood up out my chair, shouting and pleading. But Luka and Meiko seemed to remember nothing, and just silently blinked at me.

"...R... Rin! Len! Please!!"

I cried the names of those two who had turned so small. The same ones who had not long ago told me I didn't have to be so formal with their names - but they only widened their round eyes. Not a single person responded to their own name. I shouted desperately to try and wake them up, make them see that this world was

bizarre, a fake.

Meiko turned to me and spoke, her eyes tinged with doubt.

“C-Come, now... miss Villager? Calm down for a moment. Are you, ah... all right? I mean, it’s quite obvious that this is the world of the play... But what of it?”

Everyone tilted their heads at me, looking at me like I was mad. They seemed slightly afraid and kept their distance. To them... to the people in the play, the part of the uninvited guest had just suddenly started asking these questions, changing completely after staying the night, talking about things they didn’t understand... Of course they would think she was mad. But no, it was exactly the opposite.

They knew that this world was a play. They spoke about the “script,” and were *fully aware they were acting according to it*. Yet at the same time, they thought of this fake world as real without a hint of doubt. As if the fake play had been exchanged for reality, just like that. In this world, the real world - their real existences, their real memories - was completely gone.

“I’m sure the Villager is just shaken by the next page being gone... Isn’t that right? Without the next part of the script, we don’t know how to act. It’s perfectly reasonable. Everyone here is a bit unnerved, myself included,” Kaito said anxiously.

The next part of the script... Act one of Crazy ∞ nighT was over, so

that would be act two. But I couldn't remember what happened in it at all. There'd been such a strange, sudden string of occurrences, I didn't even realize that until now. My memories of what happened after I picked up the letter on the stage, and the events of act two and three in this play's script. As if my thoughts were covered in fog, I could remember neither.

All of a sudden, I noticed a book on the glass table in the center, labeled Crazy ∞ nighT. I gasped and picked it up. This was the script they were talking about... I restlessly flipped through it, and found a page was torn out in the middle. I tried to look ahead of it... but the words, while they certainly did exist, couldn't be processed by my eyes. I kept flipping ahead to make sure, but all the words I saw were unintelligible in my mind.

All I knew was act one, which had already ended... Just like the rest of them, I couldn't read the script for act two onward. What in the world did that *mean*? My vision went dark, and trying not to reveal how much I wanted to scream, I gently put the script back on the table. I put my shaking left hand in my pocket and gripped the handkerchief.

The awful possibility that had been in the corner of my mind since morning... I kept denying that it could even be possible, but while I pushed it out of my thoughts, it now seemed impossible to refuse any longer.

They were saying that because the next page of the script was gone, time had stopped, and they couldn't go to the next scene. And no

matter how hard I tried, I couldn't remember that next scene. And there was this strange script which my mind couldn't comprehend if I tried to skip past that page. It must have meant, without a doubt, that I had already become the lead role of this play world, *and was subject to its order*.

And I alone knew that this wasn't the real world...

It seemed everyone had really become the play's characters. Many times I asked them things about reality, but they showed no reaction. Not only had Rin and Len turned into little dolls, no one even remarked upon it or harbored any doubts. These *were* the eccentric inhabitants of the mansion from Crazy ∞ nighT who I saw in act one. They weren't the real people I knew, only fakes created by this bizarre world.

Where had the real ones gone...? Or perhaps the others were still doing just fine in reality, and only I had been taken away and trapped in this world? Was this "inside" the play? What could possibly be done to return to reality?

I liked to act, and I liked plays. The worlds in plays took away all the uncouth, excess, uninteresting scenes that made up the majority of everyday life, trimming it down to only the beautiful and dramatic scenes, inviting watchers to a fantastical dream world. So it was true that ever since I was young, I was possessed by the childish aspiration of someday slipping into one of those fictional worlds and living there instead. That's why with this play, I fully assumed the role of the Villager, and immersed myself in the fantasy world

she lived in.

But now that my dream had been made reality, I felt no satisfaction, only a bottomless dread for this world of lies.

I couldn't look anyone in the eye, so I just stared at the white lilies on the glass table in front of me. Such pretty flowers... I slowly reached out for them to calm myself with their aroma. But the flowers I thought were real were one solid piece, the vase included. The water in the vase didn't budge, and the flowers wouldn't come out.

Meg came over with tea for Kaito and I. I thanked her, and shakily picked up the cup from the saucer. Ah... My hand came just a little short, and dropped it. The beautiful teacup fell on the glass table and shattered with a loud sound -

My fingers trembled, but I safely brought the cup to my mouth. The refined Bergamot aroma and the slightly sweet smell of milk tickled my nose, and I let out a sigh. Meg stood before me grinning, perhaps having watched the series of movements.

I thought for sure that I dropped it, so why...? Déjà vu... Like it had happened before... I had a clear picture in my head of the cup being cleanly cracked in two. Maybe I've been told "Miku, you're so clumsy" so much that I've come to imagine plausible clumsy acts in advance? Which meant I might be at least a little less clumsy than I imagined myself to be... My hands grasped the teacup, with such a design that it seemed quite difficult to hold, as if I'd handled it

many times before.

“Our maid’s tea is truly superb. It just calms your heart, doesn’t it? Oh my, did I already say that line? Heehee...”

Meiko spoke an exact line from act one, with the exact same inflection. It did have a calming taste. Meg had made delicious tea for us in the green room many times... That was one of her fortes.

I had my first drink of her royal milk tea just after joining the troupe. I’d broken a prop for the play they were doing at the time, the prop manager scolded me, and everyone advised me on my lack of awareness, so I was pretty depressed. I holed up in the prop room after the show, and while struggling to see if I could fix the prop somehow, Meg suddenly appeared with tea, and left without really saying anything. With just one sip of the milk tea she put for me, the tears I’d been holding in burst out, and somehow, I felt so much better.

Ultimately, I couldn’t fix the prop, but I apologized profusely to the manager the next day and was forgiven. And when I went to thank Meg for her tea, she just smiled and said, “It’s best to lift your spirits with tea when you’re sad!”

I imagined the real her against the Maid in front of me, and a pain resembling grief welled up in me. She was so close, yet so far...

Once I was done drinking the tea, I neatly put the cup back on the saucer. The whole time I was busy thinking to myself, the others

seemed to still be discussing the missing next page. From time to time, someone would raise their voice angrily. The mood had gotten a little more tense than before.

“The page is torn out... Which must someone among us stole it, yes? Now who would *that* be?”

The Lady lifted her eyebrows slightly and inspected everyone suspiciously.

“Madam, forgive me, but it may be a bit too soon to declare that someone stole it...”

“Too soon...? My, it seems our butler’s eyes are going already... Rather useless, isn’t he! It’s clear here that something’s been torn out, so open up those eyes and take a look! You can see it, can’t you?! This rough tearing obviously speaks to a frantic theft!”

The Butler’s face clouded from the Lady calling him “useless,” finding it all too cruel.

“AhaHAHA! SOMEone STOLE it!”

“It MUST be! It’s OBvious! YahaHAHA! But WHO?”

“The script was in the oldest desk in the hall the whole time. Aren’t you two always playing there? Did anyone see the culprit?”

“NO one saw ANYthing...”

“No, NO one SAW!”

“Hm, the way the paper is torn... It certainly looks like it was ripped quite roughly! I don’t suppose that could speak to the personality of

the one who ripped it...? And the torn page was nowhere near the script. So then surely..."

The Master, who had silently been watching this unfold, spoke in a dignified voice.

"One of us tore out the page and hid it... Who?"

The tension in the room surmounted, but no one would so much as touch the string.

"..."

No one spoke up. Everyone stared down everyone else with dubious looks.

"No ONE will adMIT it? YahaHA..."

"Indeed. If, hypothetically, one of us did steal it, then of course..."

"But who would steal it...? And for what, hm?"

"To BOTHER us! THAT's for SURE!"

"My... perhaps they didn't want the next scene to come?"

"NO doubt, they WANT to deSTROY THIS play! YaHAHA, what FUN!"

"But wouldn't the thief be just as troubled? The play can't advance, after all."

"Um..."

I finally cut in after being silent the whole time. Everyone turned to me simultaneously.

“...If the page being lost stopped the play... is there something bad about that? I mean, um... You’re all free to talk as you like right now, and...”

If this world were a play, then the cast that lived in it could only act according to script. But what if the next scene for them to act were taken away? Then they’d have nothing to do, like right now. But was it bad for things to remain in this stopped state?

The Master spoke with a slight wrinkle between his eyebrows.

“Actors exist because there is a script. Our existence is based in the world of that script. But what happens if the script goes away? Then our existence written within vanishes with it. Wouldn’t you think?”

“Huh...?”

“Truly... It’s terrifying to even imagine.”

“A world without a script... It’s really quite inconceivable.”

The Master continued his explanation with a look of despair.

“If the play does not conclude according to script... Then the world within cannot exist. We, and this play, will all cease to exist. This world exists because of the script. For that script to be damaged means nothing less than the complete loss of order in this play.”

“EveRYONE will GO aWAY! We’ll ALL die... NO! This WORLD will have neVER existED in the FIRST place! But as LONG as we all GO

together, maybe THAT's not TOO scary, RIGHT? AhahaHA!"

"We'll have NEVER been BORN! Isn't THAT scary! Yes, get MORE and MORE scared! YAhaHAha!"

"W-What...?! These dolls are just TOO unsettling! Father! Can't we throw these things out already?! I'm feeling sick..."

"They are going a bit far, aren't they? People are going to suspect that you two are the thieves, you realize?"

The Lady stood up with resentment toward the Doll Twins' teasing, and the Mistress quietly rebuked them in an attempt to stop it.

"You're MEAN! And WRONG! PbbBBT!"

"It WASn't US! PBBbbt!"

"Then who else would steal it, hm?! Who? If you fess up now, I might not be quite so mad!", the Lady demanded, the flames of rage faintly burning in her eyes.

"Madam, you look very angry as it is! Actually, with how much you're suspecting everyone... and the rash tearing, fit for someone prone to anger... Could it be that you...!"

"Please, don't be ridiculous! Why would I ever do something so absurd?! To tear up the script... I can only imagine someone who's out of their mind! What about you, you meddlesome maid? Willing to make an incident out of everything, so bored with this mansion that you decided to just make your own incident, didn't you?"

"Oh, how cruel! I'm just diligently serving this mansion and its residents, aren't I? And if you're going to doubt anyone, the butler

is more suspicious than me, no doubt!”

“...Why would you suspect me? I wish for tranquility in this mansion more than anyone...”

“OHH? But there’s THE highest CHANCE that the BUTler DID it! Because HE stays up the LATest in this HOUSE! AhaHAHA!”

“That’s RIGHT! And he’s UP the earliEST, too! YahaHAHA!”

“...If you’re going to try that tack, then what about you dolls? You don’t need sleep, so you’re awake all night and day. There’s much more potential for you two than me, is there not?”

“...AH, right YOU are!”

“You ARE right! HeeHEEhee...”

“Hmm, isn’t there also the potential for an accomplice? The butler and maid are always busy around the mansion together... No one would suspect them, wherever they were! Because that’s their job, yes?”

“Come to THINK of it, MISTress, you’ve BEEN looking GLOOmy this WHOLE time... Did SOMETHing hapPEN?”

“...! N-No, nothing.”

“Tell me, mother, do you know something?”

I knew that these people couldn’t be the *real* ones I knew. Even so, “they,” who had the same appearances as people who always helped one another as friends, were quarreling, doubting and blaming each other. Watching this foolish scene unfold before me pained my heart.

“In any event, this situation is not a good one to be in. Such sacrilege as this - the play not going to script, it coming to a halt - can't be allowed to continue. Karma will come around, and we will pay for it. It's only a matter of time before our existences... before this play vanishes.”

Sacrilege...?! It couldn't be!

That scene in act one. Was it *because I made a mistake*? The play didn't proceed properly, and Crazy ∞ night was profaned. And my punishment... Was it a curse brought about by Burlet, by his Crazy ∞ night, that trapped me in the world of the play? If my actions had angered Mr. Burlet, the man said to make new worlds with his plays...

If that was it... then what about the others? What if they were held accountable as well, were trapped in the play with me, and made into a part of it...? Realizing that terrifying possibility, my whole body started trembling.

“Well, look, everyone! Just calm down, okay? This is just what the thief wants us to do, I'll bet. Calm yourselves with some tea for now! Miss Villager, how about a refill of milk tea?”

“Ah...”

Milk tea for the heart - how did I not notice it before?! That flavor before was exactly the same as the usual tea Meg made, and yet it was here... So they really *were* the same people, taken by this

world! Their memories were lost, and they were made part of the set...!

“Did... I...?”

It was me who had done this to them all. I was the culprit who profaned the play, and this was my punishment for ruining the production of Burlet’s lost libretto. To be trapped in this fictional world as the only one who knew the truth, dragging everyone else in, and being made to redo the play all alone. Those who profaned a Burlet play were cursed, soon vanished from the stage, and died; indeed, that long-standing legend wasn’t merely an embellishment, exaggerated over many years and blindly believed.

I was taken by the worst regret and self-loathing of my life. My pulse quickened, I clenched my teeth, and my hands shook.

“I want to go home...”

To reality. To the world where everyone was just normal... I soon found my vision growing misty, and tears fell. Everyone stared at me as I suddenly broke into tears.

“Miss Villager, are you all right...? Do you wish to return home that badly?”

“Don’t worry. You’ll be able to go home once the play ends and the night dawns, yes?”

So I couldn’t go home because the play was stopped, yet if the story

could proceed, the Villager would be able to leave the mansion. But would I really go back if the play ended properly? To where? If I were lucky, perhaps “once the play ends, you can return” would mean returning to reality? If I could perform the play as Burlet wanted it done... follow the script, and get to the ending...

“Don’t cry, miss Villager. I’m certain we’ll find the next page and reach the ending.”

The Mistress gently stroked my head. Her neatly-painted red nails... This was her hand, without a doubt. Once again, I saw Meiko in her, and the tears kept falling. If I’d really brought everyone into this situation... Everyone was highly suspicious of each other, claiming one of them had “messed up the play.” But in truth, it was this world that was messed up. This wasn’t the world they really lived in.

“How about we put the culprit aside for now... We just have to find the page and continue the play.”

“Okay! We may not know who stole it, but there’s only so many places to hide it! It’s a biiig mansion, but it has to be here somewhere! Let’s search!”

Possibly spurred by my shameful tears, the tension in the room seemed to ease up. Even the belligerent Lady and Maid seemed to temporarily make peace, though still kept their guard. I wiped away my tears and swung up my head.

“Even if one of us did steal the page... There’s no point in suspecting

one another without any proof. We'll just search for the page while staying aware that the culprit is among us."

"But what IF, the CULprit really ISN'T among US? AhaHAHA!"

"You mean, SOMEone besides US is lurKING in the manSION...? YAhaHAha!"

"All the doors and windows are locked. We all helped lock them before the party, didn't we? No one could get in."

"BAH! Then SOMEone here is LYing to us!"

"But doubting each other won't get us anywhere right now. We should split up and search."

Despite saying this, the Butler glanced toward the Master. Waiting for orders, most likely.

"Then we'll all split up and search the mansion. Time is short. Even if we find it, *if there isn't time left to perform*, it's all for naught."

Upon the Master's orders, the Butler prepared a top-down map of the mansion and laid it out on the glass table. Everyone began to decide where they would search. I couldn't just be sobbing here alone, either; I had dragged them all into this. One of the people here knew something about the truth. I had to stay focused. And I had to get them back to normal... and back to the real world.

Chapter 6: Search

The Master issued orders to everyone, and we all split up to search our assigned areas. The mansion was too large and we too short on time to search all together, so it was divided up among the seven. The divisions were made to overlook as little of the mansion's roughly thirty rooms, halls, stairs, and hallways as possible. The Master, Lady, and Doll Boy took the second floor, while the Mistress, Butler, Maid, and Doll Girl took floor one. And the Villager, who was not a resident and knew nothing of the mansion, was told to accompany and help any one of the seven.

The Master's assignment was the area to the right after going up the stairs, the south side of the second floor. The southeast storeroom, the forbidden room beside it, the Master and Mistress's room, the southwest study, the antique collection room, and guest room #8 - a total of six rooms, and their surrounding hallways.

On the north wall of the forbidden room on the second floor was a large painting of a girl dancing alone in a forest, large enough to cover the entire wall. The sheer size of it made me stop in awe. The girl in the center was painted life-size, almost exactly as large as me. The Master told me that there was a similar painting and forbidden room in the same place downstairs as well.

As for what the "forbidden rooms" were, they had apparently been locked for many years and were never used. They were already locked when the Master inherited the mansion from his grandfather; since even his grandfather didn't have the keys,

entering would require busting down the door. Yet that had never seemed necessary, so those rooms were never opened. We checked just to be sure, but there was no sign of the door having been forced open, so we deemed it impossible for anyone to intrude and focused on thoroughly searching the other five rooms.

First, we went to the storeroom in the southeast corner. The moment the door opened, the Master's eyes widened with surprise. Trying to keep in my hasty feeling that we might have found the page so soon, I entered the room behind the briskly-walking Master. He picked up a broom lying on the floor and held it in silent thought for a while.

"Um... Is there something about that broom?"

"...Well. No one typically comes in this storeroom. I was just curious why this one broom had fallen over, rather than leaning with the others."

"Fell over? Maybe someone used it and didn't put it back properly..."

"Despite appearances, the maid is an absolute stickler for orderliness. There's simply no chance she would handle a cleaning implement so roughly. But if someone entered this room, then perhaps..."

"...Oh! So you think the person who stole the page might have hidden it somewhere no one usually went? Right?"

"...Yes."

I searched the room, my chest bursting with hope that we'd find it

right away. The room was full of unused furniture and fixtures, as well as cleaning implements, and everything had collected a lot of dust. We gave a full search of every nook and cranny, but found nothing small like a piece of paper. The Master, just in case, moved around all the large furniture to carefully check the gaps between the furniture and the floor. But this was also in vain.

The once-orderly storeroom became a mess, and most everything came to be assembled near the entrance to the large room. Next time someone opened up the storeroom, the pile of things would topple over and block entry... No, not likely. But when I tried to put the furniture back where it was, the Master stopped me. There was too much else to search, he said, and no time to be putting things back.

Not even taking a moment to be despondent, we hurried to the nearby bedroom used by the Master and Mistress. I felt a bit tense stepping into the room, decorated in a uniform refreshing blue. It didn't matter that it was just scripted character backstory; it was still a high-class married couple's bedroom.

A gorgeous chandelier with crystals liberally embedded in it, a huge canopy bed like a king might sleep in, a closet containing an astounding number of dresses and tuxedos - and beautiful display shelves, tables, and chairs that one could tell at a glance were all finely-crafted to the smallest details. We searched everywhere in the room with eyes like saucers, but found nothing here either.

Drawing a close to our exploration of the master bedroom, we went

to the Master's study, which could have the highest possibility of hiding the page. But the luxurious aged desk there had only an unworking fountain pen on its surface, and nothing showed up after much opening and closing of drawers. The Master searched the bookshelves, taking each and every book with an elegant motion, flipping through the pages with his slender fingers as if toying with them, and putting it back... again and again, until the last book was checked, and he let out a quiet sigh.

We'd already searched half the rooms and still hadn't even found a clue. My shoulders slumped a little. Either the Master wasn't as concerned as I was... or it was literally in his character to always be a calm, composed, and rigid gentleman. Either way, I sensed no disappointment in him.

The real Kaito was big-hearted, mild, had a weakness for women, and smiled often. But I'd still yet to see the Master here soften his expression at all. His personality was the complete opposite of Kaito's real nature. Yet I did happen to know that Kaito really was the son of a wealthy family, and watching his practiced actions acquired from that noble upbringing did allow me the nostalgic sensation that this man was Kaito.

I certainly found it strange to think "nostalgically" of people who I'd seen just a few hours ago, but for whatever reason, that was the way I felt. Perhaps while searching for the page, I could obtain some clue by simultaneously observing these "people in the play." I wasn't suspicious of any particular person. But if the page thief was among them, I had to at least gather some clues.

Leaving the study, we then tried the Master's collection room. Before the door was even open all the way, a "Wow..." of awe fell out of my mouth. Just one step into the room brought me to a dead end, and my eyes were drawn to the collection sprawling before me. A packed arrangement of bronze statues, sculptures, weapons, ornaments, jewelry - all gorgeous, certainly very old, wondrous, and somewhat odd things I'd never seen the likes of before.

"Surprised? It's a collection of curios that have been passed down in my family. Most of this, I inherited from my grandfather, but I've gathered some of these things myself."

The Master proceeded into the room with a light gait. One wall was decorated with artifacts from all times, places, and cultures, and it seemed no two things had the same shape. One looked something like a vampire, one like a king of beasts, and yet another like a goddess of ancient mythology.

"Wow... What a long nose this mask has..."

"Ah, that's known as a tengu. A god spoken of in a small country to the east."

"It's God? ...He's kind of scary."

"The eastern lands have a variety of religious customs somewhat different from ours. In particular, one country still has a unique long-held tradition of polytheism. This mask, for instance, would be called a god in some places, but in others feared as a "youkai," a kind of monster."

“Huh... You sure know a lot.”

“...It is my only hobby, yes.”

Come to think of it, while the Master and the real Kaito's personalities were totally different, both had a hobby of collecting things. And Meg's love of classical mysteries overlapped with the bothersome Maid's love of incidents. I again thought, in a new light, how there were these similarities between the characters of Crazy ∞ nighT and their actors.

In reality, I'd broken the clock that Kaito went through so much effort to get his hands on during the show, and had been on my way to ask him how to fix it... So as I watched the Master search this collection room being very careful with everything, the fact that I'd left the clock broken started to make me feel really guilty.

“That reminds me... Kai... er, I know someone who has a hobby of collecting things too. He seems to collect a lot of stuff... but I broke an important clock of his once. I'm still sort of in the middle of fixing it, and I don't even know if it can be fixed yet. And I haven't even gotten to apologize, either... I hope I can do both soon...”

Why did I have to come to this world? But no, that was all my fault too.

“All things with form... will rot away with time. It's an unavoidable fact so long as time exists. You need not worry about breaking it.”

“...”

“Even the most fantastic creations will decay when left alone. Is

that not why people feel a desire to protect them?”

“...I suppose.”

“Do you want to protect the relics of your great ancestors?”

“Huh...?”

Relics of my ancestors? I turned to look around at all the antiques. These were relics he had inherited from his ancestors, protected over generations. But my “relics” could be none other than Burlet’s works and company. Of course I wanted to protect them. I even joined the troupe out of a desire to carry them on to future generations.

“Yes! I want to carry the treasures of the past into the future... Even if times change, and even if their form changes, I want them to remain, adopting the qualities of those times.”

“Even if their form changes, hm...? But things will change greatly from their past form over long ages... Some may say it’s something entirely different by then.”

The Master, with a face indeterminately happy or sad, gazed at a doll which had surely once been adorned with beautiful jewelry, with a vividly-colored dress. But the deep crimsons of the dress had faded to a yellowish brown, and most of the gold leaf had peeled off her crown.

Would you actually call this something “entirely different” from the once-beautiful doll, claim that it wasn’t that doll anymore? Even if a long time ago, it had been called the world’s most beautiful doll,

made by the most skilled dollmaker, could you still think of this dreadful, half-rotten figure as beautiful? What if repairing her with modern technology made you unable to say it was still her...?

I carefully took the doll and checked to be sure the page wasn't hidden inside it. But there was nothing there but frayed cotton stuffing.

I took a look at each mask, statue, and sculpture along the wall. The statues and sculptures were up on pedestals, ominously staring down from up high. My eyes fell on a large statue enshrined above my head. It was a woman riding a horse, holding two long swords up toward the sky, with mouth open wide in a war cry. She looked like she could attack at any second, yet that moment was frozen in time. The swords she was holding appeared to be real.

"Fond of it? She's a valkyrie, a goddess from Norse mythology. The sword in her left hand is one my grandfather used as a retainer to the king, on the battlefield and in protection of His Majesty. Centuries since, it's now a family heirloom. Under her protection, you see."

"Valkyrie...?"

"Yes. She's one of the goddesses of war. The name comes from old Norse, a mixture of words meaning "those slain in battle" and "choice" - thus, it means "chooser of the slain.""

"One of...? Are there other goddesses?"

“Yes. There are... nine valkyries, it’s usually said.”

“Nine...”

“Well, the number can vary depending on the tradition.”

“So, does that mean she has friends?”

As I turned around to look for other goddesses like her, I bumped into a suit of armor nearby. In that instant -

“Watch out!”

The Master standing in front of me forcefully pulled my hands, and a loud clatter echoed around me. I looked back in surprise.

“Huh...?”

A longsword lay on the ground where I had been standing. I slowly moved my gaze upward, timidly looking at her.

“Ah...”

There I saw the goddess, holding empty space in her left hand. When I knocked over the armor positioned near her, the impact shook the statue and made one of the swords slip out of her hand.

“That was close... It’s good it was nothing serious. Are you hurt?”

“Thank you... I’m fine. But anyway... I’m so sorry! Is the sword... okay...? Don’t tell me I broke it...”

“You need not worry. However, I must heed my grandfather’s

advice not to anger the goddess. Wait there a moment; I'll bring a stepladder."

The Master picked up the sword fallen to his feet and left to get a stepladder from the storeroom. No doubt he needed to put the sword back in the goddess's hand.

The moment I was alone, I slumped to the floor with relief. If the timing had been just a little off, things could have gone very terribly. The sword was real... imagining it falling from at least a meter's height and plunging into me made me shiver.

The well-polished wood floor was cool and comforting. My head could slowly cool down after blood had rushed up to it in fear. This might have been the most dangerous experience in my life. My heart was still pounding a little... I had to quickly calm down and get a hold of myself. I put my hands and feet down on the cold floor to let off the body heat.

As my hand ran along the floor, it felt something rough. What was that? I lowered my gaze, and saw a scratch in the floor that had likely been made by the sword.

"I... scratched it..."

Even if it was inside a play, it still made my heart ache to damage such a beautiful and harmonious mansion. I stood up to inspect the severity of the cut.

“Huh? Is this blood...?”

When I checked the scratch on the floor again, I noticed something red seeped in. Slowly looking around, I noticed several other scratches. I hadn't seen the moment the sword fell. Did the blade hit the floor and scratch it once, then bounce and scratch elsewhere...? No, no. Straining my eyes and looking closely, all the scattered scratches were the same size, a few centimeters. The scratch from the first impact and a scratch after bouncing off couldn't possibly be the same size. That meant these other scratches couldn't have been made just now.

And what was this red stain on one of them? I ran my finger on it. I felt a chill all over my body. Maybe it was someone's blood. It was completely dried by now, such that I had no idea what had caused this or when. I don't suppose someone else had that sword fall down on them from above, like I just had...?

I timidly looked up again as if to make sure she was still there. The goddess of war, though holding nothing in her left hand, was still galloping on air in a heroic pose. I heard footsteps from the door; the Master finally returned with a footstool.

“I'll handle the rest of this myself. Would you go help out on the first floor? The rooms there are larger and contain more items, so I think they could use the help. No one's come to contact us yet, so I doubt anyone's found it. We must hurry... while there's still time to perform.”

“Time to perform...?”

I'd heard them using that phrase earlier when everyone was gathered together.

"There's limited time in which to perform the play. We still have a good deal, but we need to find the page quickly and move on to the next scene. Already..."

The Master paused and closed his eyes to focus on something.

"...About a third of that time has passed."

He reopened his eyes and re-established his neutral expression of strictness with a hint of grief.

"Um, this 'time to perform'... How can you know how much is left? Is there a clock anywhere?"

"The only clock in the mansion is the one in the hall. And it's stopped at the moment."

"Well then, how...?"

"We have a sense of the play in our bodies. If you too want to know how much time we have, just ask your body directly."

I imitated what he just did, closing my eyes and focusing. Then, oddly enough, I could feel how much time was left in the play, a sense of its progression.

Indeed, there was no denying now that I really had become part of this play... As I recognized that, the dread of being an actor

performing in it budded in me. If the next page was never found, and time ran out... would everyone, this world, and even myself just vanish into thin air...?

I left the Master and went down the hallway, feeling my hand along the wall. He told me the kitchen and living room downstairs had the most things in them, so he wanted me to help the Maid and Mistress in searching them.

While searching for the page, there were essential tasks that only I could do... To look into a way to return to reality, and to investigate the mysteries of this world. At the moment, I couldn't know whether finding the next page and following the script to reach the play's finale would truly bring us back to the real world.

Everyone seemed to be more scared of than their world vanishing as a result of the damage to the script than anything else. But what if, by some chance, this world disappearing would automatically send us back to reality...? If that were the case, then sorry, but my choice would have to be destroying this world as quickly as possible to bring back the real actors. Because I was the only one with memories of the real world.

I also had to think about who would have stolen the page. What objective could someone have to do such a thing? Was it as the Lady said, and the next scene was an unwanted one, one which they absolutely didn't want to act out? But then, *could* they even

harbor the feeling of “not wanting to act” in this play world where the script was law? If they could only act as the script dictated, then wouldn't it be impossible for them to tear out a page from it?

But potentially, the order of the script wasn't that strongly upheld. What if it were like real life, and scripts were only “enforced” as much as the stage managers and playwrights could manage...? It could be possible, in such an unnaturally realistic play as this. Real people had simply been brought into a fictional world and adapted to it.

Reality has “scenes” which can't be omitted. Yet, my real body and mind had been directly transplanted into this world. Which meant that even here, scenes like me just walking around, going to wash my hands, ignoring other people's conversations, things that would absolutely be omitted in a play, would still take place.

As humans, there are things we don't like and don't want to do. And there are quite a few actors who are... to be blunt, selfishly fickle. If having to follow the script didn't mean your body moving on its own, saying lines word for word out of an absolute compulsion, then the people here must have been doing it as a *raison d'être* - out of a sense of duty to themselves and their world.

So, if they moved with their own free will, they would in fact be capable of stealing the page. After all, hadn't they just been quarreling and doubting each other about who stole it? Yet wouldn't that mean the culprit not only wanted to erase this world, but also themselves? Or maybe the destruction of this world wasn't

their aim. Maybe even if the play didn't reach the correct ending, nothing would actually disappear...

It was all unclear conjecture; I knew absolutely nothing for certain. I had too little information to go on. If only there were Rin or Len with their genius intellect, Meg proficient at logical reasoning regardless of her outrageous thoughts, sensible Kaito with plenty of experience, Gack with his kind advice that always hit the mark, sharp-eyed Meiko who saw all, or Luka with her one-of-a-kind intuition that always brought success.

How reassuring it would be if I could talk with them... I knew I needed to stay strong and focused so I could save them, yet instantly, I was overcome with unbearable loneliness, and as always, found myself dependent on them.

"Why did this have to happen? Why did..."

...we get trapped in this world? It was my fault, wasn't it? For sacrilege against him, against Burlet... I gripped the memento of my grandmother, still on my left hand.

"Why...? Well, isn't it because the page was stolen?"

I turned around mid-walk in surprise and found the Lady standing right behind me. When in the world had she...?

"Ahh, hold on! Ahead! Stop!"

"Ahead...? Waaahhh!"

“...!!”

The Lady grabbed my hood and forcefully pulled me back, and I landed bottom-first on the floor. Counting this morning, that was the second time today. As I rubbed my bottom, insults rained down on me from above.

“Ahem?! Don’t you know anything of danger?! *Where* were you even looking?! ...You were about to fall down the stairs before I grabbed you! You nearly died!”

“Aha...”

“...It’s no laughing matter. And... You shouldn’t be so frightened by my voice! How overdramatic! I merely deigned to answer when you asked a question. You make it seem like I’m to blame for you nearly slipping and falling!”

I really hadn’t expected someone to be up so close. From her point of view, she probably just happened to be passing through and suddenly heard me ask a question. I guess I accidentally started thinking out loud. I was just slowly walking down the hallway in thought, but apparently I’d made to the stairs without noticing. Even in a play, I’d done it again.

It was a bad habit of mine to get so deeply focused that I went into my own world, and lost sight of everything else. I just kept walking, looking straight ahead, probably at nothing in particular, and nearly tumbled down the stairs. I looked down at them - long and steep. Certainly, if I had tripped, I would have fallen all the way to the bottom. It was truly a good thing the Lady was nearby. If not, I’d

be... well, I didn't want to think about that.

For an instant, I remembered my eerie dream from this morning of someone falling down stairs to their death and shivered. I took a sidelong glance at the Lady; she was still complaining at me.

My question... Obviously, I hadn't been asking the Lady specifically, but in my mind, her reply completely missed the mark. "Reality" for her and I was different, and the very thought of there being a real world separate from this one was something that wouldn't get through to these people. So it was all up to me. I didn't have much confidence, but just like when musing over the fictional world while watching a play, I had to consider every idea I thought of as a possibility, and find a thread to follow toward the truth. Yet...

"I wonder, maybe my imagination is going wild, and I'm having a really realistic dream...? Or maybe I'm already in the afterlife... Hmm, no, that's too much of a leap. But it's..."
"Ehh?!"

My half-monologue thoughts were interrupted by a hysteric shout from the Lady. She stared at me with face warped in terror, like she'd seen a monster.

"Uh... U-Um...?"

"T-This isn't the afterlife! What are you saying?! Wrong or not, please don't say such ill-omened things! U-Understood?!"

The Lady's vigor made me take a step back on impulse.

“Ah, I-I’m sorry...! I was just having some wild ideas... I didn’t really mean anything of it. Did I upset you...?”

“Eh?! ...I-I see. It’s nothing. I just, ah...”

Her gaze timidly wavered left and right, the words seeming to be caught in her throat. This was a habit of Luka’s when she was deeply worried; I’d seen it only once before. The Lady’s current behavior reminded me of Luka’s flustered face when she forgot about an agreement with an important sponsor, and my heart ached again.

“...I just thought I saw something... shining behind you. It scared me, slightly. Perhaps it was just me...”

I turned around and saw a large portrait on the wall. But nothing else. Was it the ghost the Master claimed haunted the mansion? Surely not... I carefully inspected my surroundings and found nothing. So maybe she’d thought the portrait was a ghost... I took a careful look at the person in it. I felt like I’d seen this person before, but...

“The man in this portrait...”

He had bangs that went down to his eyes, wore a black hood, and posed with a slightly-lowered head, a finger to his lips, and a fearless grin.

“Hmm... Father tells me it’s been here since he inherited the

mansion from his grandfather. I believe he calls it a “portrait of the Silk-Hat Baron”? But what a strange name for someone wearing no such thing...”

“...!”

The Silk-Hat Baron - was this the writer of Crazy ∞ nighT, Mr. Burlet himself?! Even the local Burlet museum only had a few remaining artifacts related to his largely-enigmatic life. Among them were a few portraits, and one of them depicted him with a woman thought to be his daughter. The pose in the one I was seeing here was different, but those portraits would always have him with bangs covering his eyes, wearing a low silk hat, so people at the theater affectionately called him the Silk-Hat Baron... or, well, close enough.

If there was a portrait of him here, was this his mansion...? No, I thought someone told me the mansion in Crazy ∞ nighT’s script was merely modeled after his own mansion. I’d been so focused on this play world and the actors losing their memories that I forgot all about the playwright.

The playwright who lived with everything about him kept secret, and passed away still shrouded in mystery. If all this were punishment for sacrilege against him, did we have to grant the wish he had for this play? Surely what he wanted was for us to act out his reality just as he created it, and complete his supreme play... In that case, then no doubt he was in this world somewhere. A mastermind watching over us even as we spoke.

But did Burlet, who was thought to have died so long ago, still live?

Or was there someone else angered over Burlet's lost play being profaned? Just before I was sucked into this world, when I picked up the letter, I clearly heard the buzzer and someone clapping in the distance. Maybe that was the person behind this world... And if that marked the start of it, then perhaps we had to puzzle out the objective of the mastermind who sealed us here and fulfill it for them.

So far, I knew only a few things for certain. Because of the missing page, the play's progression was stopped, but the time originally given to perform this play still ticked on. And there had to be a mastermind - the person who sealed us in this world for our sacrilege against Burlet's play.

"Sorry to disturb your train of thought, but... If you're going downstairs, ask the maid if she's still working on "the tea thing," please?"

"...All right."

The Lady looked me over with a scrupulous gaze, but said nothing else and returned to the long gallery in front of the stairwell.

When I took the stairs back down to the hall, I saw the Doll Girl squatting by the clock again. I still wasn't used to her as a doll, but she was originally Rin. I was surely only scared because she'd become a doll, I mentally told myself, and quietly approached. She spun her head around 180 degrees to face me, and I screamed. I

reflexively backed away from the owl-like motion, but for a moment, I saw something resembling tears faintly sparkle in her eyes.

“What DO you WANT, miss VILLager? YaHAH!”

That “yahaha” laugh was a habit of the Doll Girl which Rin played, but to be honest, hearing it from the actual doll before me was scary. Rin would often call me to the empty green room in the dead of night and have me stare at her as she assumed her doll part and didn’t move a muscle... an eerie kind of practice. Her acting then certainly emanated a rather ghastly terror, but thinking of it again as I looked at this doll here, I could see there was a clear difference between humans and dolls.

“Err... I guess I was just wondering if you’d finished searching this area.”

“I’m ALmost DONE with my AREA! Didn’t find ANYthing! So BORing!”

“Oh...”

“Hey, LET’s play HIDE and SEEK!”

“Huh? But...”

“I’ll be THE seekER! I’ll count TO twenTY, so HIDE, miss ViLLAGER! OOONE, twooo...”

“Hey, wait, um... I was asked to help people who hadn’t finished searching yet, so I can’t play right now.”

“Whaaa? BORing!”

“S-Sorry... Once we find the page...”

“...WILL we REALLY find IT?”

“...”

The Doll Girl forcibly invited me to play hide and seek, but I had to refuse. There was no time to play; time was still slowly progressing as we spoke. The Master said earlier that even if the play was stopped, the performance time would advance.

I looked at the grandfather clock in front of me. In act one, the clock was stopped as a result of my unprecedented accident, but Rin and Len’s assistance kept the play itself from stopping. But this clock... It, too, was stopped a little bit before midnight.

“Come to think of it... I wonder if there’s any way to make time move for that clock...?”

“EH...?”

I muttered an idea that came to mind, and the Doll Girl looked at me in surprise.

“Like the hands, you know. If I tried advancing the time manually... I wonder if it wouldn’t move the scenes of the play, too?”

“...You SHOULDn’t do THAT. You can’t FORCE it.”

The tone of the generally-cheery doll’s voice suddenly deepened. I was sure the energetic Doll Girl would reply “Let’s GIVE it a TRY!” without a second thought...

“Err... But can I at least move it a little to see...?”

I went up to grab the hands on the face of the clock, but the Doll Girl’s little hands reached to grab my right arm.

“NO... BAD things will HAPpen...”

“B-Bad things...?”

“ ... ”

“Hey, is there something about this clock? Some kind of secret...?”

“...SomeONE will DIE...”

“...!”

Someone will die...? What in the world did she mean by that? If I moved this stopped clock, would something bad happen... would a scene occur where someone died? I stared the Doll Girl in the eyes to incite her to say more, but she only stared back with firm resolution. She wouldn’t answer me, and wouldn’t let me touch the clock hands... So her eyes seemed to say.

A thought crossed my mind. She and the Doll Boy were often here; was it because were they guarding the clock? And if moving the hands would really cause someone to die, were they trying to prevent someone’s death by protecting the hands?

I slowly turned away from her, and instead toward the hands of the stopped clock. The gold hands glinted from the light of the large chandelier hanging from the high ceiling. With a close look, I saw that it was exactly the same as the prop used on stage.

That clock was an antique Kaito had obtained after searching all around for the perfect prop. However, it was no exaggeration to say that *this* clock was like new, with not a scratch on it. And the hands? I couldn't tell just looking at it, but if this hour hand were also a knife, just like the prop clock...

"Don't YOU dare..."

The Doll Girl's low, oppressive, emphatic voice echoed ominously against the ceiling of the hall. The glint in her eyes was so strong, and carried such imperativeness, that I shuddered and nodded my head. Satisfied with this, the Doll Girl bent her head back slightly up at me, and gave a soundless, creepy grin.

I opened the door to the living room, immediately in front of me upon entering the hallway behind the stairs. No one was inside, and only the crackling of the fireplace echoed through the otherwise silent room.

On the first floor, the Doll Girl was assigned the west side of the mansion: the entrance hall and the two reception rooms on either side. The Mistress took the east side: the dining room, living room, and guest rooms #2 and #3. The Maid handled rooms to the north: the restroom, kitchen, her own room, the washing room, and the billiards room. Lastly, the Butler searched the south: the cellar and neighboring forbidden room, guest rooms #1 and #4, his own room,

and a wine cellar underneath the stairs.

I suppose the living room had already been searched. I opened up the door to the dining room beside it and looked all around, but no one was there either. However, the door to the kitchen beyond that was slightly ajar, and I heard voices as I approached. Peeking inside, I found the Mistress and Maid having a seemingly-serious discussion. I listened in, looking for the right time to intervene.

“Well then, who did it? Is there any evidence?!”

“The evidence has been destroyed! As far back as anyone remembers, there’s not a piece of physical evidence left...”

“Oh, dear...”

“...So, everyone being in one place... In other words, everyone being under the same conditions, that’s what gets things going. You’re made to think that everyone is a possibility, and anyone could have done it... Yes, it should be only one person, but you’re made to think it’s everyone... impossible... establish a motive...”

What were they talking about? Motive...? They moved further away, making it hard to hear, but from what I could make out... Could they have reasoned out who the page thief was?

“Well... I don’t know if I fully understand, but I think I get the gist of it. Still, I’m thirsty. Could we have a break for tea? I’d really prefer to drink wine, but the butler would be furious with me.”

“You only just had some! Sheesh!”

The Mistress requested tea, and while the Maid sounded reluctant, I knew she'd follow her orders anyway. She opened a cupboard and took out a bottle of tea from within. The mood eased up a little... Should I speak up now? Or...

"So... The wine was poisoned, was it?"

Poisoned...?! My hand came to a halt at the doorknob.

"Since there's so many people at a party like that, it's easy to sneak in poison."

"Yes, but it wouldn't do if there weren't that many people, would it?"

"Yeah... The culprit's aim must... at least..."

Alas, I couldn't catch anything past that. Maybe it was the stone walls and floors of the kitchen, absorbing most of the sound and not echoing much. I had to get just a little closer. But if I wasn't careful, I could be found...

As I hesitated, a kettle let out the shrill noise of boiling water. The Maid retrieved teacups for two from the cupboards. With a quiet gasp, I quietly retreated back to the living room. Then, sure enough, the Mistress and Maid moved from the kitchen to the dining room and sat at the table. The door between the dining room and living room was just a little bit open, but they didn't seem to notice me. I wanted to keep hiding behind it and listen to the rest of their conversation. The Maid poured tea with an experienced motion.

“...My, this isn’t milk tea.”

“Sorry... I just thought you might be getting tired of it. Besides, mistress, you don’t like milk tea that much, do you...?”

“...You do have a point.”

What was this about? The Mistress drank so much milk tea that the Maid thought she’d be tired of it... was that actually a part of her character? Her liking beer of every kind, having a slight alcohol addiction, was one thing I remembered for certain. But liking beer and tea, especially milk tea, I was a little less sure about...

“Incidentally, by that reasoning... Who would the culprit be?”

Culprit? So they must have been talking about the person who stole the page.

“In this case, the one who looks most suspicious at a glance is the culprit.”

“...Why? Isn’t the most suspicious person the one you suspect first?”

“That’s what the culprit wants you to think. First they give you the impression that since everyone is in the same place in the same conditions, in all likelihood anyone could have done it. Then as everyone goes back through their memories, they find the servants the most suspicious. But at the same time, they approach the fact that there were many chances for people besides the servants to put poison in her glass. Then in the next step, when unnatural proof comes forth to say a servant did it, a young detective says someone

plotted to frame them...”

“I see. And?”

“Actually, then comes the shocking twist that the poison wasn’t put in the *wine*.”

“What?! That’s much too sudden. Is the truth somewhere completely different?”

“Yes, exactly right... The truth is somewhere else entirely. For the truth to be at work elsewhere... that’s the crowning jewel of mysteries! Everyone was so certain about the whole poison in the wine thing, but it was all wrong. Right before the party... Everyone had tea in the living room, see? The culprit used arsenic. The really popular stuff for murder. And the poison was made to take effect right as the toast was made at the party.

“Not to mention, she hadn’t been in good condition recently... She had a cold and lacked sleep, so she was very fatigued. Thus, a bit of sweating and staggering wouldn’t make people notice it was poison at work. Only when the poison in the tea began to reach around her whole body...”

“Which was right as everyone began to drink wine. Then there’s only one person who could have done it... The culprit is...”

“Exactly. So you understand now?”

“...Yes.”

“But mistress, the case doesn’t end there.”

“Hm...?”

“Why do you think the deceased was in such poor condition to begin with?”

“...You don’t mean to tell me that...?!”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you. It was no mere cold that was affecting her bodily health. A tiny amount of arsenic was put in every cup of milk tea she drank. By carefully adjusting the amount, the symptoms could be freely adjusted as well. The poison was tuned to make her feel only slightly strange each time. Having no taste nor smell, she never suspected it was in her tea.”

“How terrifying...”

“For that day alone... the maid engineered the ultimate royal milk tea, and made her drink it for every little occasion. Making excuses to give it to her was, in fact, the hardest part. The victim preferred to stay at home, to say the least, and hated to socialize with people, so she would only go out on rare occasions. But as she was repeatedly given that first-rate tea, she changed. To the extent that she’d make her own excuses to visit the neighboring mansion, she became a slave to its flavor...”

My heart beat fast as I listened intently to the Mistress and Maid’s conversation in the dining room. What in the world *was* this...? The royal milk tea the Maid poured earlier was very tasty. I would be willing to call it first-rate. I had no fever, or breathlessness, or dizziness... and my pulse was normal... I think. Yet I couldn’t pass their conversation off as just idle chat.

I wanted to shake away my panic somehow, but I kept calling forth

bad premonitions instead. I'd have to get away from here and find somewhere to calm down. Right as I silently moved away from the door...

"What are you doing?"

I turned around and met the Butler. I was petrified with fear and didn't make a peep, but heard the two in the dining room preparing to stand up from their chairs. The Butler took initiative, grabbing the half-open door and entering the dining room.

Finally getting away from the shock of him showing up, I timidly followed behind him with a slight delay. The Mistress and Maid looked surprised, but the former quickly put a smile back on. The Maid went around to the kitchen and brought the remaining water from the kettle.

"My, my... This isn't the time to be sitting down to tea, you two."

"Oh? A little break is fine, surely. Less haste, more speed, as they say."

"They also say to strike while the iron is hot... It's an issue of values. You two will idle whenever you see the chance, after all. That's no good."

"Gosh! Mr. Butler, you're just too strict. We've absolutely been searching all over, not idling! Right, mistress?"

"Erm?! W-Why, yes...? We've already done the living room, dining room, kitchen, and billiards room. Yes, I believe that was it, right?"

“...Pardon me, then. However, I have been instructed by the master to ensure that you two are doing your assigned parts. So with the other half as well, I implore you to not cut any corners and do the task *correctly*. You must also exercise moderation in your breaks to sit down and chat... Understood?”

“Yeees,” the Mistress replied very disinterestedly, not seeming to be listening to the Butler.

“Well, Mr. Butler, what seems like idle chatting at a glance might just contain an tremendous hint, hmm? And the mistress here can’t drink beer at the moment, so she’s none too pleased. So as a desperate measure, I’m giving her tea loaded with caffeine instead. Come on, won’t you join us too?”

“Sigh... I worry for what lies ahead. I merely reached a halting point, and came to check on you before beginning on the remaining rooms. I’ll be returning shortly.”

“My, so cold-hearted. I’d like to finish this up quickly and drink wine to some billiards or whatnot.”

“Mistress?”

“Well, I’m just so tired. Say, what about you, miss Villager? Come take a short break. How does milk tea sound? Our maid’s tea is truly superb. It just calms your heart, doesn’t it? Ah... How many times have I said that line now? But I can’t help it, it really is delicious.”

As I silently stood there having trouble butting into the three’s conversation, the Mistress again recommended me tea using the same word-for-word line. I hesitated and couldn’t reply right away, but the Maid took that as confirmation and began preparing it. I

was curious about that earlier conversation. Could I ask them the details somehow?

“Um... About what you two were talking about a moment ago...”

“Ah, did you hear it?”

“U-Uh... I was going to speak up, but I couldn’t find a good time... It kind of ended up being like eavesdropping. Sorry.”

“Not a problem at all. It was just a bit of idle gossip. She loves mystery novels, you see. So from time to time, she tells me about all these tricks and perfect crimes in them. Honestly, though, I don’t understand a word of it.”

“Ahem! Searching at random just seemed boring, so I was trying to reason out the details of this incident. After all, having *some* idea of who might have hidden it and where has to be more effective, right?”

“Well, in such a large house, finding a single sheet of paper is quite a task. She’s been going on about it being “A major incident! A harbinger of something huge! Something bad will happen for sure!”... so I got caught up in it myself. I mean, surely it is a major incident, but...”

“Just think about it, mistress! This is clearly a theft, a criminal act! So I will find the culprit, without a doubt!”

The conversation wasn’t really getting anywhere like this, so I spontaneously interrupted.

“So, um... What was all that about poisoning...?”

“Oh, that! Well, we were talking about how the culprit could possibly steal the script and be seen by no one... no, not even the doll twins who were always in the hall! Er, and then it switched to how someone could do it without anyone else realizing... Huh?”

“Yes. She said it was an impossible crime... And to explain how it came to exist, she started using a murder mystery as an example. I swear, she’s always jumping around between this and that. We were talking about a theft, and all of a sudden it’s as if there’s been a murder. She gets much too caught up in it all!”

“Well, I mean, when I get talking, I just keep heating up... No, I start boiling over...!”

“...So, as you can see. Please don’t concern yourself about it. There was no particularly deep meaning to our conversation, all right...?”

“...Y-Yes.”

The Mistress smiled to try and clear my concerns. Then the Maid finished up and set down cups for myself and the Butler. Warm steam rose up from the delicious-looking royal milk tea. I’d carefully watched the Maid’s movements while everyone was talking, but saw nothing unnatural about them... like sneaking in poison.

First-class royal milk tea which a maid repeatedly laced with arsenic to kill a woman living nearby. After hearing a story like that... They could tell me it was unrelated, but it wouldn’t make me any more willing to drink the tea in front of me. The Butler had hesitated about stopping to take a break here, but once tea was prepared for him, he sighed, decided he might as well, and took a seat. His long

fingers covered by white gloves reached for the cup without hesitation. Come to think of it, how long had he been there behind me? Maybe he hadn't heard the conversation.

"From the looks of things, I assume no one's found so much as a clue yet?"

"Indeed. I'm sure that the moment something is found, it will be shouted all around the mansion..."

The Butler took a sip and returned the cup to its saucer. His face was slightly more gentle than before, which spoke to how truly delicious the Maid's tea was.

"Right, right. If it was stolen and hidden, it probably won't be found just like that. I'd expect a much more surprising method of concealing it! How about you, miss Villager?"

"...I helped a little with the study and the collection room upstairs... but we didn't find anything there."

While the conversation went on, I still couldn't bring myself to touch the teacup. Somehow, I could feel the Maid glancing at me the longer I left it there. The Mistress claimed it was just idle talk, but... I was caught up on it. I stole a glance at her, sitting diagonally across from me. Her smile gave the impression that it was very tasty, as she held the tea... the milk tea in her mouth.

But I was still hung up on what the Maid said earlier. "Besides, mistress, you don't like milk tea that much, do you...?" To which the Mistress replied, "You do have a point." What did she mean by

that? There was something strange about it. Why, at a time when it would make sense to simply say “You’re right,” did she say “You do have a point” after a long pause to think...?

Maybe the Mistress, upon the Maid pointing it out, realized that she doesn’t like milk tea *that* much - but drinking it all the time and having it recommended to her by others convinced her those were her own thoughts... That could be the implication. It was just a little niggling thing, but I couldn’t shake it off.

The two of them kept recommending the delicious milk tea... That made me come to suspect there was a particular reason why they wanted people to drink it. And the case of the poison they had just been talking about fit in perfectly. Offering a guest tea would be unnatural if the maid were doing it arbitrarily. So the one who invited her couldn’t have been the maid, but someone else at the mansion where she worked... Yes, most likely the mistress. She would praise the maid’s tea and treat the visitor to it. Wasn’t that the most natural flow of things? That the maid had an accomplice...

“Well, miss Villager, where will you search next? We’ve still about half of the first floor rooms to check. The most packed rooms are already done, so the rest will go quickly. After a bit more of a break... Did the master tell you to help anyone on the first floor?”

“No, he didn’t specify anyone... Ah!”

That’s right; I’d completely forgotten about the Lady’s message.

“The Lady told me to ask the maid if she’s “still working on the tea

thing“...”

The moment I said it, the Maid's face stiffened. Her mild, chipper smile was never interrupted except when she was earnestly talking about mysteries, but now she took on a sour, visibly displeased look. The Mistress let out a sigh, and the Butler looked down at his cup and drank from it as if not hearing anything.

“Still working on the tea,” I could understand, but why “Still working on *the tea thing*”? I'd felt something wrong about the Mistress's actions, and now felt that again about this unusual silence. I felt that hidden underneath it was something which only the residents of the mansion knew, and that weighed heavy on my mind. Even if they had been completely transformed into denizens of this play's world, I felt a tinge of sadness from any case of being left out of the group.

“I think that's enough of a break. Now, miss Villager, would you help me search the rooms I was assigned?”

The Butler finished his tea and stood up, bid farewell to the Mistress and Maid, and left. I thanked them for the tea and hurried after him. The Maid's head hung down, staring at the milk tea, and I couldn't see her expression.

Chapter 7: The Library

The Butler and I returned to the living room and went out into the hallway. Opening the door in front of us on the backside of the grand stairs and heading down a short stairwell, we entered the semi-underground wine cellar.

Three sides of the small, chilly room had wine bottles lined up with hardly any space between. When I took one out, something strange happened: the liquid in the bottle didn't move at all. While I was at a loss for words, the Butler explained.

"This world *is* just a play, strictly speaking. Plays contain many things which have no purpose beyond being mere background elements, and they remain so here... They need not fulfill any greater purpose than that."

That made me suddenly recall something. When I was searching the study with the Master, I casually tested the fountain pen on the desk, and despite there clearly being ink on the tip, it didn't put any ink on my hands. I thought that just meant it didn't work anymore and didn't dwell on it.

But in truth, it didn't function at all because it was just scenery for the play... If I'd tried to write something with it on a piece of paper, it wouldn't have fulfilled its normal purpose as a pen. In fact, if the paper also only existed as scenery, maybe neither of them would fulfill their usual purposes.

Yet there were definitely items like tea and pots that worked as expected... I asked what the difference was, and the Butler said there were objects which could only be used by those who would “naturally” use them, as well as inaccessible rooms. This wine cellar, for instance, could normally only be entered by the Butler, and not by anyone else without good reason.

So the characters *did* have certain principles acting on them to preserve order in the play. And perhaps I too, as the lead role, had limits on my thoughts and actions that I couldn't even perceive. Though for right now, it seemed like I could help the others out and move around freely, moreso than they could...

I looked to the Butler beside me and saw him carrying a single one of the many bottles, with only about a single glass's worth of wine left in it. I noticed the liquid in it was moving.

“Oh, that wine...”

“This is the remainder from last night's party. There's a bit extra, but I know the mistress would be angry if I threw it out... It is quite a fine age. What do you think? Do you like wine?”

“I've never actually had wine before... But the people who like it really seem to love it.”

“Yes... That's true.”

Naturally, there was a limited amount of wine to be used in the play. Wine to be used specifically for the party in act one. So they did have actual, functional wine, like the bottle he was holding now.

We searched carefully through all the little holes the wine bottles existing only as props were put in, but of course found nothing. The play's time was still passing as we worked. I'd started to neglect it while focusing on helping in the search for the page, but I had to think about Burlet's... the person who sealed us in here's objective at the same time.

While I tried to keep that in my head, at times I found myself momentarily forgetting that I was Miku. Maybe it was because everyone had slipped so naturally into this artificial world. Maybe with my tendency to daydream, I lacked a clear distinction between reality and fiction. Besides, it was easy to go along with the surrounding atmosphere. Even with the knowledge that this world was fake, I went along with everything as if it were reality.

For no particular reason, I looked at the mostly-empty wine bottle the Butler was carefully holding. The label was very faded, and that alone told me it was rather old.

"Has something caught your eye? This wine is quite vintage. It may be rare, as well. In fact, everything in this cellar is very old and high-quality."

"I know wine has a reputation of being more valuable the older it is, but is wine that's been left to ferment for decades really tastier...? I mean... than the newer stuff...?" I aired my naïve doubts to the Butler.

"Who can say? People's tastes will differ. There are a wealth of kinds, with different flavors, dryness and sweetness, even smell and

kick. But, I suppose that's not much of an answer. Well... Many will say that wine fermented for longer has that much more of a depth to its taste... The same as with people. With the passing of time, life experience will show on their character, and as if not satisfied with "plain"... they will form habits, like a hidden taste. Whether they're desirable or not, though, is a matter of preference.

"And not to mention, time is always moving forward. Wine can be made with the greatest technology of its time and then fermented for decades, but once it comes time to open... Often times, in that advanced future, it will be easier to make more delicious wine than that without spending any time for it to ferment."

The explanation reminded me of my conversation with the Master in the collection room. He said he dedicated himself to protecting the wonderful relics left by great ancestors of the past.

"...Mr. Butler, which do you prefer?"

"Hm?"

"Wine made with the diligent effort of past masters, ripened to the ultimate vintage over long years of fermentation... Or wine that can be easily be made in no time at all with future advancements, but is still perfectly tasty...?"

"...That's a rather difficult question."

The Butler fell into silent thought, putting his hand to his mouth. The cramped stone wine cellar was filled with fermenting bottles of wine, awaiting the day they would be opened. Though they couldn't speak, I could imagine them anticipating a sommelier's judgement.

After a while, the Butler breathed out and spoke.

“At times, people will say even the most well-aged wine is too fermented for their tastes. Just too old for them. Indeed, the majority will say it shouldn’t ferment for *too* long. And also...”

“...?”

“Ages pass, people grow old, and values are ever-changing. What was regarded as supreme in the past will not necessarily merit the same opinion in the present. It is for those who live in the current age to pass that judgement. To become so seized with protecting past relics that you forgo living in the present is but nonsense... So some think.”

“Nonsense...?”

“Yes. However, I... look gladly upon that nonsense. If those great people of the past knew that I did so, would it not please them tremendously? Of course, it can go too far... If their descendents live for their ancestors, and sacrifice their own lives for it, that would surely be a sad thing for them both.”

A sad thing for them both... Somehow, I felt like he was talking directly to me. We, the company, were all big fans of Burlet, and felt it our mission to carry his legacy to future generations. But what would Burlet say if he saw the struggling troupe of the present? Would he say thank you for finding his lost play, and performing it as he always desired?

It was no exaggeration to say that the huge amount of publicity that

came from the discovery of Crazy ∞ nighT allowed the troupe to temporarily evade bankruptcy. The support from our longtime sponsor company, Kaito's dad, and the gentleman who was a fan of Len were allowing us to endure through our many debts, as Ia had told me. But in a changing era with a booming new entertainment industry, even if Crazy ∞ nighT were a runaway success, it was unclear if we could continue performing only Burlet's works without any changes.

I believed the reason we were trapped in this world now was because I'd messed up his perfect play, was cursed for it, and he wanted me to redo the performance of his ultimate script. No mistake in acting out his scripts would be tolerated, and the acting and sets had to be perfect, or Burlet would never forgive it; so went the anecdote passed down in the troupe.

Thus, I came under the impression that Burlet himself was a very strict and unrelenting man. But I wonder, was that really true? I began to question my conjecture a little.

"When great relics of the past are brought to the present, and extended into the future... Does that really make the creators of those things happy? If something seems ready to crumble at any moment, but you want to protect it at any cost..."

I grabbed the bracelet on my left wrist - a relic from that legendary playwright passed on via my grandmother. Though the Butler likely didn't understand what in the world I... what the Villager was asking, he still heard me out. He stared down at my wrist and

patiently waited for the next words to come.

“Someone told me that all things with a form will eventually decay. But, what if what you want to protect is formless... like a story, or a play? Even things that don’t have a form to begin with can easily be changed from their original forms. But maybe, because of these changes... Even as the times and people change, if the work changes along with them, it can survive without decaying...”

“...You have some rather interesting thoughts... I think that’s magnificent. There are so many different kinds of people in the world that there’s also an infinite variety of people who create such great works. Whether they would unconditionally be pleased or not... I can’t answer with any certainty. However, speaking for myself, in a sense... I would likely give my applause, and a heartfelt word of praise.”

The Butler kindly smiled at me.

Finishing with the wine cellar, we proceeded to do the guest rooms on the south side. The Butler had already checked his own room and guest room #4 by himself, so we went to guest room #1.

“Huh...? Was I here before...?”

My hand stopped before opening the door to the guest room. Finding this to be a familiar sight, I took a look around, and noticed

the layout was just like the south side of the second floor which I explored with the Master. Both floors had the exact same carpets, walls, and even ceiling ornaments in their hallways, so I was briefly uncertain which floor I was on.

“Ah, so you were searching upstairs with the master. Yes, this is right underneath. The layout of the first and second floors is largely identical. We often do get lost. Certainly, a visitor who only just arrived would... But yes, even we do quite often.”

“...I see.”

He was right, the layout was so similar that I couldn't immediately answer whether this was the first or second floor. While looking around, my eyes stopped on a certain point, and my legs brought me over. Though I'd seen it on the second floor, too... A “forbidden room,” next to guest room #1. And on the north side of it was a huge, wall-covering painting. A painting of a girl dancing alone in a dimly-lit forest... Was this the exact same as the one hanging outside the forbidden room up above? As I stared closely at it, the Butler came over to me.

“This painting also hangs in the hall outside the second floor's forbidden room, as well.”

“Exactly the same one...?”

“No, technically they are different. The painting on the second floor depicts dusk... the time just before sunset. And this painting shows dawn; a scene set just before sunrise. The two of them together are considered one work. The title is Twilight ∞ nighT.”

“Twilight ∞ nighT... Dusk and dawn...?”

“Let’s say you were blindfolded and taken to witness the two scenes depicted in these paintings. Which one is dusk, and which is dawn...? Do you think you would know?”

“Huh...?”

“Myself, I don’t think anyone would know the difference. And from what my former master told me about this painting... in truth, no one knew. It illustrates how we have no way to determine whether the reality we see before us is real... or just a fake.”

“...!”

Reality...?! Was the Butler aware that this world was a fake, and that his real self existed in a separate one? Though when I called everyone’s names in the living room earlier, no one showed any reaction at all...

“The world is made by our awareness. And that is a highly fragile and ambiguous thing. The thought of *being* makes the world aware of your existence. The existence of something other than you is what allows you to be aware of yourself. To be cognizant of the past, there is the present and future. You think you are alive, so you live... Thus, people can only live in the world they recognize. Because “living” can be said to be when you recognize your existence here and now. If you deny that, it’s the same as death...”

“The same as death...?”

So did that mean everyone, having forgotten their true selves, was effectively dead? Their memories lost, living in the play’s world.

Their pasts and the lives they led all died... Was that it? And I alone was just barely living still...?

“So tell me, which twilight do you prefer?”

I took a close look at the painting here.

“I... can't really tell the difference at all yet. I guess I like both...?”

“The artist painted the girl within almost exactly the same way... But if you take repeated close looks at the colors, you'll start to notice slight differences.”

“Dusk and dawn... They look similar, but they're completely different. One's about to get darker, and one's about to get lighter... Their following scenes are complete opposites. Is the similar layout of the two floors meant to say that similar-looking things can be completely different, too...?”

“Hm...?”

“Oh, um...! I just had that hunch. I imagined the person who built this house having that kind of aim...”

“...That may be so. Similar-looking, but very different in actuality. Perhaps nothing exists in this world that is exactly the same. Even the word “same” is little more than a concept created by people...”

“So it's used more as a measure...?”

“Yes, precisely. Language is no more than a tool to communicate ideas. Well, at least that was how it originated. At times, we

mistakenly think that language came first. We believe that, behind the words a person speaks, we can see every aspect of their true intent expressed in those words.”

“...”

“That’s also the epitome of theater.”

“The epitome?”

“Depending on the performers, the same script can create entirely different worlds. And even with the same people performing, the conditions, mental states, and bodies of the actors will always differ. So plays can be enjoyed again and again. Some fans call that the epitome of theater.”

“That’s very true...”

Indeed, some customers would repeatedly buy special seats for long-running plays by the Burlet Company. Like the Butler said, they could watch the same story repeated over and over, and enjoy them as new worlds brought about by slight differences in the performance.

“Now then... I’ve gone on rather long. We should return to our search of guest room #1.”

“Okay...”

We carefully searched all of guest room #1, but didn’t find the page. I put my hand to my chest and checked the time. Half our performance time had already passed. I knew we couldn’t hurry, but it certainly made me feel hasty imagining it running out on us. All this searching, and still nothing... not even a clue.

The Butler told me there were probably people having more trouble than he was, so I left guest room #1 to help someone else. The hallways were just like the second floor ones, and similar paintings, though different if I looked closely, hung on the walls. For instance, a painting of thick and lively roses in a vase on the second floor was matched by one with withered petals on the first floor. The same composition, but at different times... It seemed as if all of the paintings were like that.

As I reached the hall, I heard a beautiful melody. The Doll Girl was playing piano. That's right; she did play piano in a scene in act one.

Rin and Len were geniuses who could do just about anything. In addition to the lute Len played in act one, he was also skilled with string instruments like guitar and violin. I think it was Meiko who told me both of them had professional-level piano and violin skills, and often had sessions at home. However, Rin herself told me she didn't like piano very much anymore. She'd only play it to soothe herself when something sad or painful happened... So when she learned she had to play it as the Doll Girl in act one, she let it slip that she didn't really want to.

Just what song was this...? The piano was somewhat out of tune; it seemed a little too low. As a result, the slow waltz in major key sounded like it was minor key, giving it a sorrowful tone. I forgot myself and listened to the odd mix of sadness and cheerfulness for

a while.

“OH...? Miss VILLager. How LONG have YOU been there?”

The Doll Girl noticed me and stopped playing to face me.

“Um... It was such a wonderful song, I got engrossed in listening...”

“Well, THANK you.”

“Er... What is it called? The song you were just playing.”

“...THIS is Dolly’s DREAMing and AwaKENING. The PERFect song for ME, right?”

“Yeah...”

“...SAY, Miss VillaGER, do you DREAM?”

“Huh? Dream?”

I flashed back to the dream I’d had this morning. A woman... Maybe an actress, dying at a theater.

“I do, sometimes...”

“HMM. Dolls DON’T dream. Do you KNOW why?”

“...?”

“BeCAUSE, dolls don’t SLEEP!”

“A-Ah...”

“Funny, ISN’T it! YahahaHA! Hey... Do you WANT to hear MORE? I’ll PLAY lots for YOU.”

As she said this, the Doll Girl’s eyes seemed to turn a bit lonely.

“Umm... But I still need to help everyone look for the page...”

“It’s FINE, just for a LITtle while!”

‘But...”

“Hey, PLEASE!”

Out of the blue, she hugged me. It was too sudden for me to make a sound. As much as I understood that she was formerly Rin, I couldn’t get rid of the fear I had of these dolls.

“I’m sorry! But I really need to help the others. I mean, if we don’t find the page...”

“But you CAN just STAY here...”

“Huh?”

“It’s oKAY. ToDAY will go ON, so...”

“Today will go on...?”

What did that mean? If the performance ran out of time without the page being found, wouldn’t this world disappear? In what way would “today go on”...?

“This SONG goes ON, too... In fact, THIS is the MAIN part... The SLOWly turnING waltz turns inTO fierce four-FOUR time. Yes, it’s DOLLy’s awakenING...”

She grinned creepily, looking up at me from around my waist. I jumped back in terror, and in doing so, something flew out onto the floor. It was an envelope; I picked it up.

“Oh, this is...”

Wasn't it the letter I'd had in my pocket? The one I used in act one... It was addressed to “Miss Miku.” This wasn't the play prop. It was the letter I picked up on stage before being sucked into this world. I fearfully turned it over, and found written on the back: “Until the End roLL has lost its color... ∞”

“End roLL...?”

I slowly opened it up. But inside, there was only a blank sheet of paper folded in two. The Doll Girl had come up near my feet again. I supposed I dropped the letter while leaping away from her.

“Hey, what's THAT letTER...?”

“...Well, I don't know either...”

I was so certain this was the letter I picked up then, but nothing was written on it. I definitely remembered reading that letter. It was just the important part - what it said - that I couldn't remember anything about. I had definitely read an actual message then.

So what was this letter, then? It must have been the prop I used in act one, wasn't it? So it had a use sometime after the start of act two. But currently, the next page of the script was missing, so everyone forgot everything from the next scene on. Unfortunately, I'd completely forgotten what this letter had written on it, and what role it played.

This letter was a prop that would later be essential in the play. But was it lacking its contents because of the missing next page...? I looked closely at the neatly-folded paper, and it was just paper. The color was greatly faded from it.

“AH! This is ABOUT the same SIZE as the SCRIPT!”

“I-It is...”

“But THERE’s no TEAR on it... Too BAD!”

I’d have to check to be sure, but my rough judgement was that yes, it was the same size as the script pages. But also the paper was perfectly clean, no signs of any tearing.

“UnTIL the End roLL has LOST its coLOR... ∞?”

Perhaps this was the “End roLL” - in other words, the ending - the last page of the script. If that were the case, then I could understand why this would be blank. The removal of the next page made the story unable to progress. So the conclusion was undecided, thus a blank page; that seemed plausible.

If the missing page and the following scenes remained unfound... would it be possible to skip right past them to the ending using this page, I wonder? If that were doable, then we could make the story end. But right now, it was still just a blank page. I threw around all sorts of ideas and suppositions to myself, but I couldn’t get my thoughts in order. They were all nothing more than predictions. No point in going in circles with myself; I would discuss it with the others.

“I think I’ll show this letter to everyone later, and ask their opinion...”

“...I SEE! That SOUNDS good!”

The Doll Girl seemed to agree. If she’d been wise Rin, I probably would have discussed it with her right away. But as much as this doll looked like Rin, she was just a doll. I felt a little bit of relief having finally found one thing that could be a relevant clue.

But at the same time, I realized something that I couldn’t believe I’d been overlooking. If someone stole the page, shouldn’t the first thing to do have been conduct a body search of everyone? If one of the seven had stolen the page, then just like I found this letter in my own pocket, it was highly likely they were hiding the next page in their pockets, clothes, or possessions. Absolutely, doing a search of everyone should have come first. Since we hadn’t found it in any of the rooms yet, the probability of that seemed greater still.

Now that I’d noticed it, I couldn’t linger around. I headed for the second floor to let the Master know and have him gather everyone.

The corridor going up the second floor stairs. On a high-reaching wall extending up to the ceiling of the surrounding hallways was a large painting, depicting many angels flying in front of a gate to heaven. As I hurried up the stairs one step at a time, I became entranced by the austere mood given off by the painting, and soon

noticed the backside of the Doll Boy. Right as I climbed up the final step, he grinned and approached with his stiff gait.

“I’ve BEEN waitING, miss VILLager.”

“Huh?”

Without waiting for a reply from me, he took my hand and led me in the opposite direction of where I wanted to go, to the north side of the second floor. He stopped in front of a door, then turned around to face me.

“Do YOU know where THIS is?”

The door was shut fast, so I didn’t know what kind of room was inside. I told him that I didn’t know, and he replied that he’d show me and took me in. The power relationship was just the same as in reality; once again, he had me in his hands. Even though I had to hurry to the Master and tell him about this letter... I heard the Doll Boy shut the door behind me.

It was a library filled to the brim with books. With an exception made only for the door, every wall had bookshelves along it reaching up to the ceiling. Four small chandeliers hung from the ceiling, bathing the room in light. Around the middle of the room were three tables, and beside them were sofas and armchairs of varying size. It was an orderly, refined, and peaceful room which readers would surely love.

However, for some reason, large teddy bears sat in the chairs, and

there was a toy teaset on the table, as if put there for the bears. It was made to look like they were relaxing while reading books. Whose hobby was this, I wonder? Though a bizarre sight, the fancy stuffed animals helped add a bit of relief to the crushing feeling from the sheer amount of books.

“Wow... There are so many books...”

I didn’t necessarily like reading that much, but I loved calm and quiet places like libraries. I’d often go to the library on my days off to bask in that mood ideal for thinking, open up a favorite script, and imagine the play in my head.

“Do you LIKE it? These SHELVES are the BEST part, right?”

“Y-Yes... It’s a very wonderful room.”

But, yes... I couldn’t be here. The Doll Boy had suddenly dragged me here, but I had to go talk to the Master. As far as I could see, it was unlikely the boy had found the next page.

“Um, I...”

“If you READ the BOOKS here, you NEVer KNOW what you MIGHT find...”

The books here...? I glanced over the shelves. There were too many to know where to start. And checking all the shelves now would no doubt use up all the remaining performance time.

“Don’t you WANT to KNOW? The SEcrets of THIS world?”

“Huh...?”

“Then READING the BOOKS here will BE fastEST, I think...”

Secrets of this world? Maybe such things as the reason we had been trapped here, and a way to get out, were written in these books? But the Doll Boy had forgotten his past of “being Len” and became a doll here, hadn’t he? And he was a cruel, prank-loving doll. Maybe he had simply seen me hurrying in the corridor and decided to stop me to play a prank.

For the time being, I decided I’d pretend to pick out a random book and read it, and watch for my chance to get out of here. As I reached for a book on the nearest shelf, he said “Not THAT; the FIRST shelf is HERE,” indicating the top-left book of the bookcase to the left upon entering. It was high up toward the ceiling... I couldn’t even tell how many of myself would need to be stacked to go that high, and I couldn’t reach it no matter what I did. Then the Doll Boy, demonstrating unexpected strength, brought over a long, worn stepladder from the corner.

“SurPRISED? If you THOUGHT I was WEAK because I’m a DOLL, you’re VERY wrong! AhaHAHA!”

With a cocky laugh and boast, he grinned. I’d underestimated his small doll body. But now I was shown how if he put his mind to it... no, without really even having to do that, he had strength on par with a human. The doll laughing in front of me without budging an eyebrow was scarier than ever.

“I’ll HOLD it from BELOW... Be CAREful, it’s HIGH!”

He claimed he’d hold the stepladder, but I felt unsure considering his size. And this was quite long looking at it up close... About five meters, at least... Leaning it against the shelf, I slowly went up step by step. It creaked with each step, making me anxious about its age.

Finally, I reached for the dusty book in the top-left. Just as I did, I saw the book give off a pale light. Surprised, my right foot went a step back, and my weight shifted to one side. The wood under my feet creaked.

“Huh...?”

I threw my right foot back forward to re-establish my balance and placed it down on the step. A moment later, I heard a cracking sound, and my footing lowered. Oh no - I felt myself slowly falling back. Bracing for an impact, I closed my eyes.

Bfft - the impact was much softer than I expected, and didn’t hurt at all.

“...H... Huh...?”

“...Are you oKAY?”

The Doll Boy spoke. But where did he go? He said he would hold up the stepladder, but all of a sudden hadn’t been there. Splintered wood fragments laid around the floor. It had looked worn-out, surely, but I hadn’t expected it to break *now*...

“I’m HERE...”

I heard the voice from right under me, beneath something soft. I looked down and saw a large teddy bear... and the Doll Boy crushed underneath?! I quickly pulled the bear away, and the fallen Doll Boy crawled out. So I’d used the teddy bear and him to break my fall...

“I-I’m sorry! Are you all right?!”

“...I’m FINE. Dolls ARE STURdier than HUMans. You’re JUST kind of HEAVY...”

“Oh...”

I was a little hurt by that, but I was glad he was okay. The little silk hat he wore had fallen off, so I handed it to him, and he awkwardly put it back on his pretty blond hair.

Still, when did he move the teddy bear? The bear was a little bigger than the boy, and was doing just fine in spite of me falling on it. If the Doll Boy hadn’t put this soft friend here... The ceiling was high enough that I had to stretch from the top of the stepladder to reach it. So I nearly fell backward about five meters... Not to mention...

The library had high-quality Persian carpet, but for some reason, it was absent in front of this bookcase alone, revealing the marble floor underneath. If I’d landed in just the wrong place, then...

“You ALmost DIED there! CAREful, careFUL!”

The Doll Boy lifted up his hands slightly and shook his head exasperatedly. Yes... I had come close to dying, *again*. I was always very clumsy and mistake-prone, but since coming to this bizarre world, there'd already been three dangerous occasions where one wrong step would have spelled doom. Were these all coincidental accidents, or...?

"Looks LIKE you got THE book, THOUGH!"

"Oh, you're right..."

The book I'd risked my life to get lay near my feet. There was no title on the binding. I picked it up and looked at the cover; there was something written on it, but thick dust covered it, so I couldn't make it out.

"How incredibly dusty... Is this a rather old book?"

I blew on the cover and the dust flew up. So much dust scattered that it got in my nose and throat. I started coughing, and the Doll Boy sighed with disgust.

"First nighT...?"

The moment I spoke the title that finally appeared from behind all the dust, I felt a strange unease coming up from my feet, like an unknown darkness enveloping me. You shouldn't read this book - a warning from another self seemed to echo in the back of my subconscious. My hands, prepared to open the book, froze in place. Was this intuition...? Or was it the odd causality of this strange

world acting on me? There was no doubt that *something* important was written in this book.

A worst-case scenario crossed my mind. What if this book said that once we were trapped in the world of Crazy ∞ nighT's script, we would never be able leave for all eternity...? Just imagining it made me sweat. But on the other hand, what if it had a hint to solving the mysteries of this world...? Maybe it could guide us to a way back to reality. Equal parts hope and unease began to swirl around in my head.

If only, when presented with a strict two choices, I had the chance to try again if I messed up; then I'd be able to advance without hesitation... But I was always unable to actively advance with such decisions. I'd immediately start thinking about what if it was the wrong one, cowardly refusing to muster up any courage. Even the reason I left the village, and the circumstances of joining the troupe... When faced with important choices, I had to have someone pushing me ahead to move forward.

“...”

Suddenly, a small right hand touched my left, frozen on the book's cover. I looked down and to my left in surprise. I only saw the back of his head wearing a little silk hat; he wasn't looking at me. What kind of expression did he have? His doll hands were cold as ceramic. But in that cold warmth, I thought I found the awkward kindness of the real him, Len. I had to return him to normal - and I wasn't alone here, so I wasn't scared.

I took a deep breath to calm myself. Feeling slowly returned to my left hand. Like opening an iron door, I lifted open the heavy cover, and put my hand on the first page.